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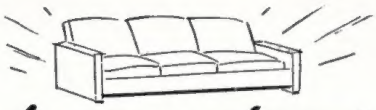

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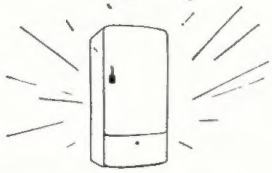

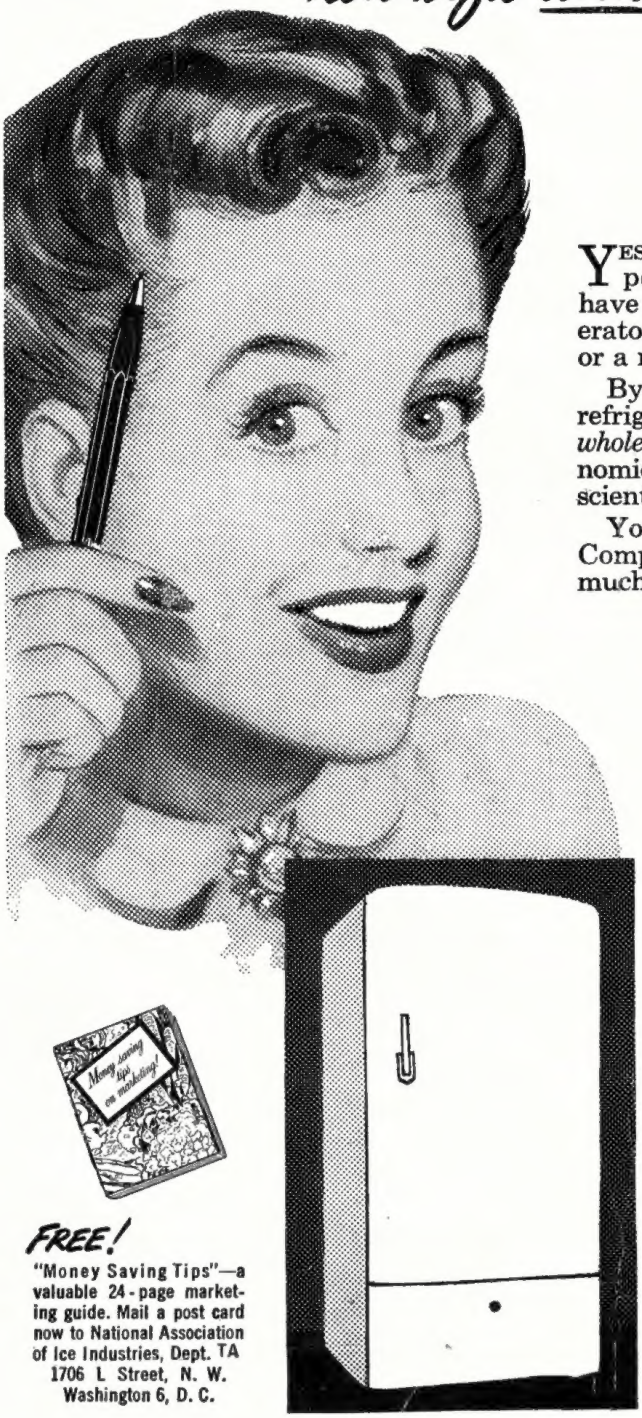

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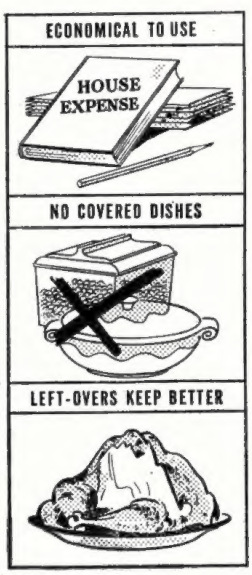

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It was a case of love at first sight between Dan and Nita—but before they could wed, Dan had to prove he wasn't guilty of trying to drygulch her dad!

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A Department for Readers Conducted by TEX BROWN

HOLA, ever'body, and welcome to the circle o' swell rannies and ranny-gals about the good brandin' fire. Sure's a warm feelin' about this old heart o' mine when I see the "outfit" ridin' in. Well, relax yoreselves, roll a smoke, and we'll swap some yarns o' the good rangeland while the coffee makes up its mind to start boilin'.

Ain't never any tellin' what sort o' story you're gonna hear. Take the recent one about the ranny down Texas way what's gone in for ropin' jackrabbits in place o' steers. Yessuh, Hood Abercrombie o' Lubbock, Texas, pleads guilty o' the charge. Sure sounds like a stunt he's thought up for the fun o' killin' time, don't it? But fun ain't the half of it—the ranny's lassoin' the jacks for money and, I hear tell, he's doin' plumb all right at the business.

Hood claims lassoin' the long-eared, leapin' babies is just as good sport as ropin' steers. Well, mebbe. I gotta admit folks what ain't tried it out sure cain't be in a position to argufy none. And Hood oughtta know. He's bulldogged, roped, and tied 'em, right along with the best o' the lot. Still rides the rodeo circuit six months out o' the year.

Here's How It's Done

How's the trick o' ropin' rabbits work? Well, durned if it don't sound reasonable when you hear it explained. Seems Hood has got three assistants in his businss venture, and they operate in a stripped-down car which same is equipped with a spotlight. Comes a dark night, and the darker the better, the waddies take their special car out into the country. There's lots o' big jack rabbits down Texas way, and the boys know 'bout where to look for 'em. Pretty soon, as they cruise around, they jump a long-eared jack. Right away they go into action—but pronto!

One ranny swings the spotlight on Mister Rabbit, the driver guns the hot rod, and Hood and still another ranny start in to lasso the animal. Well, suh, ever'body, they not only catch him, they bring him back alive. The boys say they caught a hundred jacks durin' one night's hunt. But mostly, they admit with due modesty, they'll average about twenty on a foray. They then sell these lively rabbits to the operators o' dog-racin' tracks. Two dollars a rabbit. Not bad, sez I.

Yep, I reckon you guessed it. The boys don't use reg'lar lass ropes with a loop in the end like's used in ropin' cattle. Instead, they use a net which they toss over the rabbit. When a wild jack gets hisself tangled in the net he's a goner, betcha!

If you ask Hood Abercrombie why in Sam Hill a first class cowboy give up ropin' steers and started the business o' nettin' rabbits, his eyes may twinkle a little, but he'll answer solemn like:

"I guess it's because a jackrabbit can't kick as hard as a steer or a horse."

Desert Plants

Now to hop from the subject o' rabbits into the desert bushes, all on account o' a inquiry what's layin' here top o' the stack.

Myrle Homer writes from her home near Vicksburg in the good old southern state o' Mississippi, and she's wantin' some information about certain desert plants.

Myrle says she does a whole heap o' travelin' by means o' books and magazines and the public library in her home town. This year she's followin' the Old Spanish Trail west. Since comin' to the plains and desert

o' the Southwest she keeps runnin' acrost names o' plants and such what she ain' familiar with, though she knows the flora and fauna o' the good black earth in Mississippi pretty well.

"What," she asks, "is the botanical name of the mesquite bush they write about in western stories?"

Well, Myrle, I dunno about the genuwine botanical names o' plants myself, me bein' just a sort o' horned toad what loves to roam about the range and sniff the odors. But I'm told on good authority that mesquite belongs to the acacia family. It exudes a sort o' gum in the fall o' the year that's as potent as any from Arabia.

A Pleasant Scent

Lemme pause right here to tell you about the odor or scent o' the mesquite plant. You ain't hardly aware of any smell 'til the foliage is brushed, but when brushed the plant gives off a scent that's powerful pleasant to them that love the out-o'-doors. Don't smell exactly like a pine forest, but that comes as close to it as a old unimaginative ranny can come. There's the flavor o' that gum, and it's sort o' pungent like.

I've rode along desert trails durin' and after a summer shower, and the smell o' mesquite with the rain beatin' on its leaves made the delightfulest, he-man kind o' perfume a ranny would want to smell.

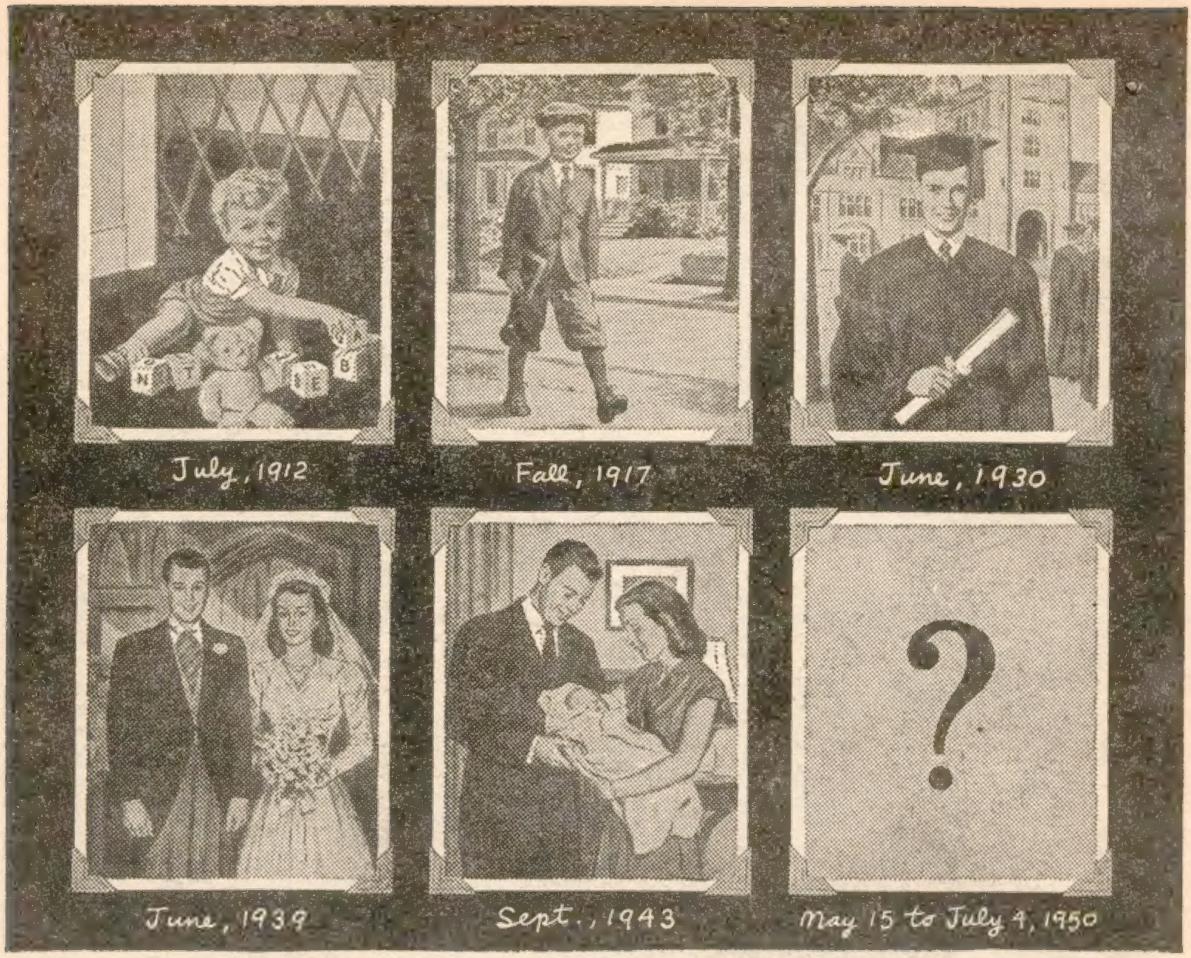
When the folks out in that western country go on camps and picnics and there's mesquite to be had, they bring up armsful of it. Soon's the camp fire gets blazin' bright they toss on the mesquite. At once the air is perfumed with the pungent odor.

Then, with the stage set proper, some ranny takes his old guitar and there's music what'd make you weep with joy. Ever'body singin'. Ain't nothin' can match it, fellahs and gals. And in the future when you recalls the night and its joys, the smell o' the mesquite will haunt you like a dream.

Mesquite Bread

Well, gettin' back down to earth, Myrle: There's three kinds o' mesquite—three varieties—and two of 'em are edible, though nobody eats mesquite much in this day and time. Not even the Injuns. But the red men used to pretty nearly subsist on bread made

(Continued on page 139)



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SIXGUNS and a Senorita

A Novelet by A. LESLIE

When Mort Lane struck gold he wanted to build the kind of boomtown where he could found a family—not a clip joint!

CHAPTER I

The Moaning Hills

"MORT, all we'll ever find in them blasted hills is a grave!" Old Andy Webb wagged his grizzled head and frowned at the hills in question. He turned a disapproving gaze on his young partner, fished a hunk of eatin' tobacco from his pocket and worried off a chaw. His jaws worked ruminatively for a few moments. He took careful aim and drowned a lizard six feet distant with a stream of amber juice.

The lizard swam out, shook a browned and disgusted head and put another

yard of distance between himself and the prospector. Webb measured the distance with his eye and "pulled trigger" again. The lizard swam out a second time and went away from there. Young Mort Lane chuckled, produced the makin's and rolled a cigarette. Through the blue wisping of the brain tablet he contemplated the hills for which they were headed.

It was not an inviting prospect. Brown, gaunt, strewn with boulders, slashed by canyons and wide dry washes, their rocky ridges standing out like the swollen veins on a dying man's forehead, the hills fanged upward to the hard blue of the Texas sky. They had a grim, forbidding look and they were austerely uninviting. Cactus, greasewood, sage and mesquite struggled to survive on their stony slopes, and did so in scattered patches.

But where a spring trickled forth from under a cliff or underground water fertilized the earth, the thickets were dense and stood out in black bristles against the brown monotony of the slopes.

Old Andy did not like the looks of those wide and dense thickets.

"This is Injun country," he remarked pessimistically. "Leastwise Injuns pass through this way a lot from over in the lower Bend country and from up around the Guadalupes, and they're bad. Apaches and Comanches. Enough cover up there among them rocks to hide away a whole tribe. Uh-huh, all we're goin' to find up there, Mort, is a grave."

"We'll chance it," Lane returned lightly. "And I still believe we have a chance to hit it rich."

He fumbled several chunks of rock from his pocket as he spoke.

"These came from up there," he remarked significantly.

Andy Webb took the fragments and examined them with care, as if he had never seen them before. In fact, he had examined them a score of times, with never failing interest and a trace of excitement.

"They're rich, all right," he admitted. "All shot and veined with wire gold. And you still believe that Mexican's yarn that he got 'em up in them hills."

"Don't see why he'd lie to me," Lane replied. "After all, I did him a mite of a favor."

"Just saved his wuthless life and did it at the risk of your own," Webb snorted. "But just the same, maybe he lied, or was plumb loco. Why didn't he go back and look for where they come from?"

Lane smiled, his teeth flashing white and even in his deeply bronzed face.

"You seem to forget," he said, "that a Texas Ranger sort of persuaded that gent to go back East with him and have a little talk with a grand jury about a shooting in McMullen County. I've a notion that about now he's dressing awful loud, wearing his hair tolerable short and staying indoors of nights."

"He'll live longer in the penitentiary than we will in them hills," Webb declared pessimistically. He turned and gazed southward.

"Good prospectin' country down there," he said. "I've always believed there's metal in them ridges."

"Maybe," Lane agreed. "But it wouldn't do you much good if you found it. That's rangeland, and mostly private owned. Nope, it's us for the hills."

"And a grave," Webb snorted. "Might as well expect to find metal in a grindstone as in them rocks. Prospectors have been passin' them hills by for years."

"Yes," Lane agreed, "just as they passed by the Tombstone Hills over in Arizona. And then along came Ed Schiefflin and took millions in silver from them. And the gold miners in Nevada walked over the Comstock Lode that later made a score of men rich. And hundreds walked past the Mother Lode in California. What's been done once can be done again."

"Oh, well, come along," sighed Webb. "We can camp on that mesa up there ahead. There's a crik runnin' across it

and plenty of grass for the horses and the mules."

THE mesa was something over three miles distant, with a fairly steep climb of three hundred feet to its level expanse. Flanking the southern base of the hills, it was a mile in depth and two miles wide. It was dotted with trees and clumps of thicket, mostly near the creek

MARIA

banks, and grass grown. Over it loomed the sinister ramparts of the hills.

From its floor the view to the south was magnificent. East and west the hills curved around it so that it lay like a lamb between the paws of a crouching lion.

The prospectors made their camp on the south bank of the creek. The bank was shelving, with a drop of about four feet to the water. To the east and west of the little clearing in which they built their fire was dense thicket which afforded a comforting wind break. The thickets were less than a score of yards distant. Old Andy Webb surveyed the scene with the appreciation of a desert wanderer.

"Fine place to build a house," he remarked.

"Even finer to build a town," said Lane.

Webb snorted. "Prairie dog town," he said. "Them varmints are the only things would live out here miles from nowhere."

Mort Lane looked thoughtful. His gray eyes narrowed a trifle. He pushed back his broad-brimmed "J.B." and ruffled his thick black hair in a gesture habitual to him when pondering a new notion. However, he said no more and busied himself with preparing the evening meal.

The sun was down when the partners finished eating. The sky above the western mountains was aflame with scarlet and with gold. The east was steel-blue shot and dappled with rose. To the south the more distant mountains were a violet shadow save for one towering pinnacle that gleamed molten silver in the last sun rays above its somber base. And over the mesa hung the grim poverty hills with their sparse thickets bristling up like the stiff beard on a scarred dead face and the wind moaning eerily against their crags and pinnacles.

Lane rolled a cigarette with the slim fingers of his left hand. Webb fished out a black pipe and stuffed it with even blacker tobacco. For some time they smoked in silence. Then they cleaned up and after making sure the horses and the two pack mules were comfortable, they rolled up in their blankets beside the dying fire to sleep the dreamless sleep of the wasteland wanderer. And as they slept, a ring of death closed around them.

It was the warning snort of Rojo, his big red-sorrel, that awakened Mort Lane in the dead, dark hour before the dawn. Instantly Lane was hair-trigger alert. He had learned to respect the reactions of the highly intelligent horse. Rojo didn't let loose that explosive blow for nothing. It meant that something had startled him, something of which he was not exactly sure.

A moment later he whistled his breath softly through his nose. And Lane knew instantly it was not a prowling mountain lion or inquisitive coyote that had disturbed the cayuse. There was a human prowler, doubtless more than one, somewhere around the camp. As he listened with straining ears, he heard a slight scuffling sound in the thicket to the west, such a sound as a carefully placed foot might make when slipping slightly on an unexpected round stone.

Lane reached out and touched Webb. Instantly old Andy was awake. But with the wariness of a seasoned campaigner, he did not start or speak out. His own fingers topped the back of Lane's hand, and that was all.

"Something in the thicket over to the right," Lane breathed. "I don't like it, Andy."

"Injuns!" Webb breathed back.

"Maybe," came the faint whisper in reply. "If it is, they're getting ready to rush us at the first light."

"They'll cut loose on us with their guns soon as they can see us," breathed Webb. "What we goin' to do?"

"This," Lane replied. "Ease out of your blanket and leave it rolled where it is. I'm doing the same. Then crawl to the edge of the crik bank and slide over. Got your rifle? Okay. No noise or we're done."

The maneuver was executed successfully and without the slightest sound. The partners crouched under the shelter of the overhanging bank, peering intently toward the black mass of the thicket beyond the bed rolls beside the dead ashes of the fire.

FOLLOWED a long and trying wait, the most disagreeable part of a fight in which a man grows nervous and begins to reflect earnestly upon his sins. Lane and Webb knew that if there were really Indians in the thicket who meant business they would not attack until just before dawn in the common native fashion, thinking to surprise and rush their victims in the low and puzzling light. Also, the chances favored the savages being Apaches, and Apache gods forbid night attack; the night is sacred to ancestral ghosts. They would watch and wait during the hours of darkness.

The east began to gray. The stars paled from gold to silver, dwindled to pinpoints of steel. A faint breeze shook a myriad dew gems from the grassheads. Somewhere a bird sang a liquid note and was still. The silence became intense. Objects grew dimly visible.

With paralyzing suddenness the silence was shattered to shards by a roar of gunfire. The blanket rolls beside the dead fire twitched and jerked as bullets hammered them. Echoing the reports came an appalling screech and a crashing of the brush. From the thicket burst five horrific figures, faces streaked with paint, low-slanted eagle feathers fluttering from dingy white turbans. Feet encased in high boot-moccasins thudded the ground as the Apaches rushed the camp, knives gleaming in the dawn light.

Webb's Winchester boomed sullenly. Both Mort Lane's sixes let go with a rattling crash.

Three Apaches went down before that blazing volley. The remaining two leaped high in the air with yells of consternation. Down they came and bounded forward like rubber balls. Again came a crash of gunfire from the creek bank and a fourth savage went down, kicking and clawing on the very edge of the bank. The fifth, with a ululating howl, plunged over the crumbling lip and squarely on top of Mort Lane. Down they went together in a kicking, slashing, striking tangle.

One of Lane's guns was dashed from his hand. He pulled trigger with the other and heard the hammer click on an empty shell. He lunged forward frantically with his empty hand and by sheer luck his fingers coiled about a sinewy wrist and held. He lashed at the Indian's head with his empty Colt, but the savage writhed aside like a greased eel. Lane's wrist came down across his bony shoulder and the second six went flying.

Over and over they rolled at the edge of the water, the Indian tearing and clawing at Lane's face with taloned fingers. Lane struck out with all his strength, felt his fist connect with an impact that jarred his arm to the elbow. At the same instant he forced the knife-holding hand upward and back. They whirled over, the Apache underneath. The Indian's yell ended in a bubbling

Slowly but surely the pursuers closed in on the overburdened horse

shriek. He gave a hollow groan, flopped madly about, stiffened, relaxed, and was still. Lane staggered to his feet.

"Hell and blazes!" yelped old Andy. "You're covered with blood. Where did he dig you?"

"No place," Lane replied, shaking himself disgustedly. "It's his blood, not mine. He fell on his own knife. Drove it clean through him. Are the rest of the hellions dead?"

"Sure look it," Webb replied, peering through the strengthening light at the stark forms scattered around the clearing. "Let's make sure."

"Careful!" Lane warned. "They're good at playing possum, and a wounded Apache is deadly as a broken-back rattler."

However, the savage raiders were all satisfactorily dead.

Old Andy snorted and swore. "What'd I tell you?" he said accusingly. "We ain't even into them darn hills and we come within an inch of gettin' sculped!"

"But we didn't," Lane replied cheerfully. "Well, let's collect the carcasses and drop 'em in that crevice over there and cover 'em with rocks. Don't want to leave them lying around. Some more of the same sort might come along and find them, and then try to nose us out to even up the score."

"Chances are they'll do it anyhow," Webb declared pessimistically.

With considerable labor they disposed of the bodies. The Apaches' rifles, first-class weapons, they added to the pack mules' burden.

"Chances are there'll be some ponies over the other side of the thicket," Lane said. "We'll round 'em up and drive 'em into the hills with us."

"That's your chore," nodded Webb. "You used to be a cowhand, before you took to lookin' for rocks."

However, rounding up the Indians half-wild mustangs proved to be too much of a chore for even Mort Lane, former top-hand on numerous spreads. Finally, in disgust, he drove them across the mesa and down its sloping side. He nodded with satisfaction as he watched them, tossing and snorting, vanish into the south.

"They'll head for the grasslands down there the other side of the arid stretch," he told Webb. "Well, everything's taken care of. We'll clean up, cook some breakfast and head into the hills."

Webb gloomily gazed at the rock filled crevice.

"Graves!" he growled. "Started already. What did I tell you?"

"But not ours," chuckled Lane. "Everything's going to be okay, pardner. We're already getting the breaks."

Old Andy shook his head as if not at all convinced.

CHAPTER II

Grave Town

DURING the days that followed, Mort Lane began developing a disquieting feeling that the veteran prospector might be right in his contention that there was no metal to be found in the Espantosa Hills. If the Mexican wanderer had not made a mistake, the hills were very reluctant to give up their treasure.

"Snakes and lizards and cactus and greasewood, that's all," Webb snorted. "Dry camps half the time at night and dust and sun all day long. We've worked back almost to where we started and ain't found a thing. Grub's gettin' low, too, and nothin' to shoot 'cept varmints a buzzard couldn't eat. Son, we're just chasin' after moonbeams."

The following morning they were almost within sight of the mesa where they made their first camp, having circled the range to the west, north and east and back west again. Lane was almost ready to concede failure. Webb was looking forward to a comfortable camp once more with plenty of good water and possible fresh meat.

About mid-morning they entered the mouth of a wide dry wash. Its sides were thickly grown with grass and flowering weeds, but its bed was scoured into ruts and gulleys and littered with boulders and float.

"Lots of water comes down here in rainy times," Lane observed.

"Uh-huh, and if we happen to get caught by a cloudburst while we're in

this crack, we'll be plumb drowned before we dry out," Webb predicted.

Lane nodded. "But look at the float scattered about," he consoled his gloomy partner. "I've a notion those cliffs up ahead get all busted up in the spring thaws. This looks like good ground to me, Andy."

Webb was not enthusiastic. However he industriously gathered and examined float as they progressed up the wash. Suddenly he uttered an exclamation.

Lane peered at the jagged fragment Webb held in his hand. It was streaked and stained with mineral. He took it and went to work with his chipping hammer. The stone split under the first blow. Lane stared, uttered a long whistle.

Webb also stared, his eyes widening in disbelief.

"It ain't so," he muttered. "Can't be."

"It is!" whooped Lane, fumbling in his pocket.

"W-wire gold!" sputtered old Andy. "If we can just find out where this come from!"

"Look!" exclaimed Lane, producing his specimens. "Andy they're the same. This is where my amigo from Manana Land picked them up."

"You're right," Webb admitted. "Come on, pardner, this float must have been washed down from the cliffs."

WALKING so fast they were almost running, they headed up the wash. The following horse and the mules were forced to trot to keep up with them.

As they walked they picked up more float. Several chunks showed heavy gold content.

Finally they reached the base of the cliffs. "Quartz, all right," Webb exclaimed.

"And the face is all cracked and broken by frost," said Lane. "This is it, Andy."

It was. The rock was shot and veined with wire gold.

"And sure to be high-grade pockets," said Lane.

"It's all high-grade," Webb pointed out, "and the veins look to run for miles. Pardner, we're rich!"

"Going to be, I reckon," Lane agreed quietly. "Well, we'll spend the rest of the day looking over the ground. Tomorrow we'll locate."

"I've a notion right about here, at the center of the wash, is the richest deposit," Webb decided. "We'll locate our two claims right here. Of course we can locate others on other ledges, if we want to."

"I think right here will be enough," said Lane. "Let other folks have the rest. But we're locating three claims, Andy."

"Three?"

"Uh-huh, one for the Mexican gambler who gave me those specimens."

"That's a notion, all right," Webb agreed. "He's sure got one comin'. Let's see, what was his name?"

Lane looked blank. "Darned if I know," he replied.

"Oh, well, it don't matter," said Webb. "Call him Pedro. All Mexicans is named Pedro, or Juan. And Lopez is a good Mexican name. One claim for Pedro Lopez. You won't have any trouble nosin' him out, if he's over to the state prison for that shootin', as you figger. A hefty passel of dinero may help to get his sentence shortened."

"Reckon so," Lane agreed. "As I gathered from the Ranger, it was a shooting over a monte game, not a cold-blooded killing. Chances are he didn't get an overly heavy sentence."

At the close of the day, old Andy was bubbling with enthusiasm.

"Mort," he said, "this is goin' to start a stampede that'll make Forty-nine look like a Sunday School picnic. Just wait till we get to town and spread the news! The settin' is perfect, too. Just a couple of miles to the mesa down there and fairly easy goin' all the way. Won't take much road buildin'. And there's plenty of water on the mesa to operate the quartz mill. It's prime. We'll post our notices tomorrow mornin', fust thing, and then we'll hightail to town and file."

"Yes," Lane replied slowly, "we'll locate and post tomorrow. But, Andy, we aren't going to file just yet."

"Eh? Why not?"

"Because," Lane said, even more slowly, his eyes looking out over the far distances, "first we're going to get title to that mesa. That's all state land, Andy. We've got a few pesos salted away, be-

tween us, and we can get that land for mighty little."

"But what in blazes do we want with it?" asked the bewildered Webb. "Ain't no gold ledges down there."

"That's where you're wrong," smiled his partner. "The biggest ledge of this whole section is down there."

OLD ANDY wagged his grizzled head. "Knowed it to happen before," he observed sadly to the nearest mule. "Hit on a prime metal strike and they crack up. Uh-huh, go plumb loco and begin imaginin' things. Didn't think it would happen to him, though. Allus seemed to be a level-headed younker. Too bad!"

Mort Lane chuckled. "Don't you see it, old-timer?" he urged. "Don't you see that the real gold mine is down on that mesa? As you said, this strike is going to start a regular grass-fire stampede. And this is no pocket strike. The lodes in those cliffs are liable to keep on producing for years and years. What does that mean? It means that folks by the thousands will be pouring in here.

"Folks have to eat and they have to have places to live in. Where there is one miner swinging a pick, there are half a dozen other folks providing for his needs and helping him spend the money he makes. It will mean a town in this section, a hell-roaring town, and the only place for a town is on that mesa. And once it gets going, it'll be here to stay, even if the gold petered out next year, which I figure it won't do.

"A town right here would be a perfect supply station and hanging-out place for all those big cow spreads to the south, east and west. It will be nearer and more convenient to them than Buckley, down to the south, where they do their buying and playing now. And remember, the railroad is building west not fifty miles to the east of here. Let a first-rate, growing town spring up here, and they'll shift the line a mite north to tap it, I'll bet a hatful of pesos.

"Pardner, we're going to build a town on that mesa, and we're going to own the land it's built on. We'll lease or rent, never sell, and we'll be sitting pretty for life, aside from the good we'll be doing a lot of folks."

Old Andy slapped his thigh with a horny hand. "By gosh, that's a plumb prime notion," he agreed. "Sure we'll build a town, and we'll build a nice big school, too. I never had no chance to get much eddication, and I've plumb missed it lots of times. We'll fix it so the kids that happen along hereabouts will get their share of book learnin'. Uh-huh, we'll build a school."

"We sure will," Lane agreed. "And a hospital. And we even might build a church, a kind of church where all sorts of folks can go and talk things over and figure out ways to do good for each other and other folks. I never paid much mind to churches, but that sort of a church hits it off with me."

"Uh-huh," nodded Webb, "a sort of meetin'-house church. That's a prime notion. That sort of a church will go along fine with the school."

Until far into the night the partners talked and planned.

"Mort," Webb suddenly exclaimed, "what in blazes are we goin' to name that town?"

"Andy," Lane chuckled reply, "you've done named it. You've been talking 'graves' ever since we landed here. We're going to get the joke on that grave business. Uh-huh, we're going to name our town—Grave Town!"

CHAPTER III

Fists and Guns

AS LANE predicted, they had no trouble securing title to the mesa land at small cost, although it took a little time. Then, when everything was in shape, they had their specimens assayed and filed their claims.

After some discussion, the recorder agreed to file for Pedro Lopez.

"We'll have the court appoint a trustee to look after his interests till we locate him and get him here," Lane explained. Which silenced any objections anent irregularity of the proceeding that concerned the recorder.

The assay showed the ore to be of astonishing richness.

"A regular Mother Lode!" chortled Andy Webb. "Pardner, things are goin' to boom!"

They did. The news of the strike spread like wildfire. Prospectors swarmed into the hills. Claim after claim was staked. The lode extended for miles, and there were others almost as rich. And after the vanguard of miners came the business people who saw opportunity in their various fields.

Mort Lane staked off about a third of the mesa next the hill slopes.

"Outside this line is for shacks and cabins and houses for folks to live in," he said. "Outside this line the land is free. First come, first served. Inside is the business section of Grave Town. Folks wanting to set up business establishments are expected to pay for the privilege."

The business people paid, paid gladly and well. Lane leased the first plot with the stipulation that a building be started on it within an hour. It was started within half an hour—a saloon.

Grave Town grew like a stack of chips behind four aces. Streets were laid out. Graders and scrapers slashed and tore through the thickets. The air hummed to the rasping of saws, the ringing of axes and the click of hammers. Wagons loaded with lumber and supplies rumbled up the slope to the mesa. Road builders were busy constructing a wide thoroughfare through the hills and up the dry wash to the site of the mines.

The first bar in the first saloon, canvas roofed till the shingles could be nailed in place, was a long and wide board laid across two barrels. The first dance hall had no roof at all for a while, and nobody seemed to miss it. The mesa beyond the growing business section was dotted with tents, lean-tos and hastily thrown together shacks. These were swiftly replaced by more substantial dwellings as supplies and materials rolled in. Before two weeks had passed there were false-fronts on Main Street, and windows of plate glass.

"We've taken in enough on leases and advance rents already to get our claims producing without borrowing a cent," Lane told his partner. "The bank at Buckley has offered us practically unlimited credit for development. We'll take advantage of that now. And this is your chore, seeing as you know all about it.

"Arrange for setting up two big stamp mills to crush the ore and extract the metal. I want five-stamp batteries in them. We'll crush our own ore and we'll crush for the other claims. When the development warrants it we'll build more. Get busy, pardner."

ANDY WEBB got busy. He contracted for the necessary machinery and equipment and paid a bonus for quick delivery. A swarm of masons and carpenters began erecting the gaunt, towering buildings that would house the batteries. Within a month the grinding rumble and roar of the stamps doing their ponderous dance in the battery boxes filled the air.

About this time Mort Lane received a surprising letter from the McMullen county authorities, to whom he had written relative to the missing "Pedro Lopez."

Judging from the data and description you provided us, we would say that the individual in question is one Manuel Garcia who was returned here for investigation by the Texas Rangers. Two days after he was brought here, Garcia broke jail and escaped.

He might as well have saved himself the trouble, for the grand jury, after weighing the evidence, refused to indict, holding that Garcia had undoubtedly shot in self-defense. Nobody knows where he went. Presumably back to Mexico. He can stay there so far as we are concerned. We have no further interest in him.

"Oh, well," said Webb, "chances are he'll show up sooner or later. If he don't, we'll try and track him down in manana land."

Meanwhile, Grave Town was feeling its oats. After the legitimate business people came the inevitable camp followers of any strike. The gamblers, the saloon hangers-on, the gentlemen of doubtful antecedents and unpredictable futures who preferred to do their riding between the hours of sunset and sunrise, the women with too-bright eyes and too-

red lips. The acrid tang of powder smoke began to mingle with the smell of tobacco and split whiskey. Grave Town's busy hum loudened to a sinister roar.

"She's a humdinger," said Andy Webb, "and she's gettin' livelier every day."

"Yes," agreed Lane, "too darn lively. We want a real pueblo, Andy, not a hell-town. We've got to do something about it."

"We need a city gov'ment with a mayor and a town marshal," said Webb.

Lane nodded. "That's the notion, all right," he replied. "Things are plumb getting out of hand. Too darn many saloons is the chief trouble."

"That's right," Webb answered soberly, "but you can't very well stop 'em. Another big one is openin' up tonight, down to the lower end of Main Street. Mexican feller owns it. They call him Mexican Pete. Fine lookin' feller, all right. Tall, slim, grayin' black whiskers. Uh-huh, a plumb real gent. I've a notion he'll run an orderly place. 'Pears to be all right in every way."

"Mexicans are all right, the right sort, just like anybody else," Lane said. "Think I'll mosey down that way tonight and see what he's got. Been too busy of late to look things over much. Sort of interested in Mexicans. If it hadn't been for one, this town wouldn't be here right now. Sure wish we could locate that Garcia feller. Think I'll write letters to the *alcaldes* of some of the towns down below the Line. They might be able to give us some information."

"Them town mayors down there usually know things," Webb admitted. "Do that, Mort."

THAT evening Lane sauntered down Main Street until he reached the new place, which was named The Alhambra. He entered the saloon, glancing at its big, mirror-blazing back bar pyramided with bottles of all shapes and colors, its two busy roulette wheels, faro bank and poker tables. A going place, all right, he admitted. His gaze strayed to the dance floor in the back and stayed there.

"Hoppin' horntoads!" he muttered. "Where did she come from?"

A girl was dancing on a table at the edge of the floor and she danced with the grace of a flower swaying in the dawn wind. The table top was littered with bottles and glasses, but her tiny feet disturbed not one. She was small and slender but with plenty of curves where curves were in order. There was a proud lift to her head, and her waist was of unbelievable slimness.

Her eyes were dark and flashing and astonishingly large. Her curling black hair framed a small oval face that was blossom-white in startling contrast to the dark hair and eyes. Her sweetly formed lips were hibiscus-red and there was a touch of rose on each soft cheek. There was a vividness to her that caused Mort Lane's breath to catch.

Near the table, watching her intently, was a man Lane instantly decided must be Mexican Pete. He was a rather tall man, lean and slender, garbed in black velvet, his plain black sombrero drawn low over his broad forehead. He was bearded almost to the eyes, but the grizzled beard and the crisp mustache were carefully trimmed and combed. His coloring was singularly fair. As Andy Webb said, he looked the hidalgo, every inch of him.

"Sort of familiar look about him, too," Lane mused. "Seems I've seen him somewhere before. But the grandee type of Mexican all look alike, I've noticed."

He dismissed Mexican Pete and turned his attention to the girl, who was going through an intricate step, her lithe young body the very personification of alluring movement.

The girl finished her dance and leaped lightly to the floor, her face bright with laughter at the applause that shook the room. There was a proud look in Mexican Pete's black eyes as they rested upon her.

From a nearby table, a big cowhand, more than a little drunk, lurched to his feet. He strode to the girl and flung an arm around her slender waist.

"Come on, honey, let's you and me hoof it," he rumbled.

The girl deftly disengaged herself from his embrace and stepped back.

"Not now," she said in perfect English, her voice soft and liquid. "Later, perhaps."

"Aw, come on," urged the cowboy, moving toward her again and reaching out a hand.

Mexican Pete stepped in front of the girl.

"Not now, Senor," he said courteously but firmly. "You have been drinking too much. The lady—"

"Who told you to butt in!" the puncher interrupted toughly. "Out of my way!"

HIS big hand shoved the other back, reeling. The elderly Mexican caught his balance, gathered himself together, his eyes glittering. But before he could move, Mort Lane stepped between them.

"Hold it," he dropped over his shoulder to Mexican Pete. "You're out of your class with this jigger. He's twenty years younger and seventy pounds heavier.

"And, feller, you're plumb out of order," he told the cowboy.

The puncher's face flushed darkly red. He took a menacing step forward, his long arms swinging at his sides.

"Who sent for you?" he demanded truculently. "Sift sand away from here before I skin you up till you look like a fresh hide."

Mort Lane's gray eyes narrowed a trifle as they rested on the other's angry face.

"Nobody's sitting on your shirt-tail," he remarked composedly, but with a significance that was not lost on the cowboy. His face contorted with anger. He gave a wordless bellow and rushed, fists swinging.

Mort Lane hit him, left and right, hard. He staggered back, blood on his face, shook his bristly red head and charged in again.

And again Lane hit him, hard, slashing blows that left their mark. He barged into the table and over it went, scattering bottles and glasses on the floor.

But the cowboy was big and he was tough. He caught his balance, boomed his wordless war cry again and charged back, head bent low.

Mort Lane weaved aside to avoid the other's rush, stepped on a broken bottle and staggered, off-balance, and the puncher caught up with him. There was nothing to do but stand and slug it out.

Lane was a big man, nearly six feet in height and weighing around a hundred and ninety pounds, almost as much as the cowboy, and he was lean and hard from long months of desert wandering. His driving punches brought grunts from his opponent.

But he was taking plenty himself. A red spot showed on one cheek bone. There was blood on his lips. His head rang as the other connected solidly with his jaw. He ducked and grimly bored in.

A wild flurry of blows, panting breath, hissing grunts, and then Lane's right arm suddenly jarred to the shoulder under the force with which his fist landed. The cowboy reeled back, groaned, whirled around and fell on his face, twitching and writhing and gasping for breath. Lane stepped back, panting.

The four cowhands at the table, who had been whooping encouragement to their companion, surged to their feet with a storm of oaths. Mort Lane saw a flicker of metal. His hands flashed down

[*Turn page*]

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and up in a blurred movement too swift for the eye to follow. The room rocked to the boom of a shot.

ONE of the punchers yelped shrilly, clutching at his blood dripping fingers. The gun he had drawn spun across the room and clattered on the floor, its stock smashed by Lane's bullet. His companions froze in grotesque attitudes at the menace of Lane's rock-steady muzzles.

The room was in an uproar. Men dived wildly in every direction to get out of line. The cowboys stood tense and rigid, waiting their chance. The air was stark with impending tragedy.

It was the big puncher who created the needed diversion. He rolled over, scrambled to hands and knees and bounded erect like a rubber ball, with a roar of anger.

But his wrath was not directed at the man who had bested him but at his companions. He strode in front of Lane's guns and shook his fists at the cowhands.

"What the roaring blazes!" he bawled indignantly. "Can't me and this gent have a sociable wring without you jugheads shovin' in your two pesos' worth? He licked me, but I done proved that none of you bowlegs can do it. Set down there and 'tend to your own business 'fore I take you apart."

He whirled and faced the elderly Mexican proprietor.

"Sorry, Pete," he boomed. "I didn't mean no harm; just wanted to dance. Won't happen again." He turned to Mort Lane, thrust out a big paw. His crooked but very white teeth flashed in a boyish grin.

"Shake, feller," he said. "No hard feelin's. It was quite a go while it lasted, wasn't it?"

He flung an arm around Lane's shoulders. "Come on, feller," he urged. "You and me are goin' to have a drink together. Feel like celebratin'. Ain't been hit so hard since Paw landed on me with a scantlin' for puttin' ants in his liver pad. Come along."

He led the way to the bar, bellowed for whiskey.

"Where's the gal?" he asked suddenly.

"Pete shoved her into the back room when the rukus started," somebody offered. "She didn't want to go, but he made her."

The cowboy shrugged philosophically. "Oh, well, what's the difference!" he said. "She's too nice a gal to be dancin' in this place, anyhow. Reckon she's Pete's *querida*—sweetheart. No matter. Lots more gals around. Good lookers, too. Not in her class, but not bad."

He chortled in his throat, grinned at Lane, bawled for another drink and waved to his fellow punchers to come and join them. Lane smiled reply, with an unbending of his usual reserve. It was impossible to hold aloof in the presence of this exuberant combination of tornado and sunbeam.

None of the other cowhands appeared to harbor resentment, not even the man with bullet-skinned fingers. But nevertheless, the incident set Mort Lane to thinking seriously.

"Making of big trouble in that rukus," he told himself as he walked back to the cabin he and Andy Lane occupied. "Sooner or later that sort of thing ends up in a killing and a taking of sides. First thing you know, you have a real row, the kind that keeps on bubbling. Got to do something about it before it gets out of hand.

"But that girl," he added reminiscently, "Isn't she a wonder!"

CHAPTER IV

Marshal of Grave Town

THE result of Lane's thinking was a meeting the following evening of the various business men, the mine owners and workers. At the meeting a system of town government was drawn up. A universally respected proprietor of a general store was elected mayor. A town clerk was also chosen. Next came the highly important matter of a town marshal. There were several suggestions, then the new mayor rose to his feet.

"Gents," he said, "there's just one man hereabouts who can handle that chore as it should be handled. He's smart and he's salty, and he's the biggest property owner hereabouts. And he's the

man really responsible for this town being here. If he can spare the time, I figure Mort Lane is the man for the job of town marshal."

The proposal was received with acclaim.

Mort Lane hesitated. He didn't want the post. But he felt that he owed an obligation to the town of his creating. And he could spare the time. After all, the management of the mine was largely in Andy Webb's capable hands. Webb knew all about it, and he, Lane, didn't. And Lane knew that the prosperity of their properties was dependent on Grave Town becoming an orderly community. Let the irresponsible elements get control, and there would be trouble and losses for everybody.

"All right," he said tersely. "If it's agreeable to everybody, I'll take on the chore, until you can find a suitable man to take over permanently."

The mayor's motion was seconded and carried without a dissenting vote.

But Lane knew there was considerable opposition to the plan for an orderly community. Very few of the saloon keepers, gamblers and others of similar ilk attended the meeting. Mexican Pete was there, but the others were mostly conspicuous by their absence.

Mexican Pete stopped Lane for a moment as the meeting was breaking up.

"I want to thank you, Senor, for what you did last night," he said, a peculiar expression in his black eyes shaded by the low-drawn sombrero. "You are indeed a real amigo."

Without waiting for Lane to reply, he turned and walked swiftly away.

Lane watched him go, and shook his head in puzzled fashion.

"A funny jigger," he mused, "but he's a real gent, or I'm a heap mistook. And he sure knows how to pick girls!"

Old Andy Webb was not at all pleased by the turn of events.

"You're takin' on a tough chore," he told his partner. "There's a bad element driftin' into this town and they ain't goin' to take kind to regulatin'. Remember what I said in the beginnin'; it's almighty easy to find a grave in these hills. We already got a boothill started—them two gamblers who did for each other in Rader's place last week. To say nothin' of them five Injuns moulderin' in that crevice down there."

"Reckon you're right, in a way," Lane agreed, "but if we aim to have the decent sort of a place here we planned on, there's got to be law and order. The new calaboose is mighty nigh finished, and if necessary I'll pack it to the doors. We've got the substantial element back of us, Andy, and that sort of public sentiment wins out in the end."

"I agree with that," Webb replied, "but it won't do you much good personally if about that time you're busy pushin' up daisies. Yes, we've got a bad bunch here already, and more comin'. That feller Rader who opened up the first saloon here don't like you, Mort. He ain't never liked you since you wouldn't sell the land he wanted outright but made him take a lease."

Lane was forced to admit the truth of the statement. Jess Rader, who owned the big First Chance in the center of town, was a gaunt, uncommunicative sort of man with dead-black eyes and a lean, tight-lipped face that never seemed to move a muscle. From the beginning the more turbulent element of the town had centered in his place, and there had been trouble in the First Chance more than once, culminating in the double killing the week before.

"I'll have a little talk with Rader, later," Lane promised.

The following evening, during his rounds of the town, Lane dropped into the Alhambra. He glanced about, spotted the dance girl sitting at a table, alone. After speaking to one or two casual acquaintances, he walked over to the table. The girl glanced up, and smiled.

"Won't you sit down?" she invited.

Lane dropped into a chair. "See you're not dancing tonight, ma'am," he remarked.

"No," the girl replied, regretfully. "He won't let me dance any more."

She gestured to where Mexican Pete stood nearby.

"Not a bad notion," Lane agreed with the proprietor of the Alhambra. "You attract too much attention, ma'am, the way you dance—and look."

"But I love to dance," she replied. "I've danced ever since I was a little girl.

I danced in a cantina my—that he had down in Mexico, and nobody ever thought anything of it."

"Folks are different down below the Line, in old towns," Lane said. "In a pueblo like this one, just building up, there's a different element. Not all of them are plumb nice."

"That is true," the girl agreed. "But most of the people here are. That big cowboy the other night, he didn't really mean any harm."

"No, he didn't," Lane agreed. "But he took the sort of liberty with you that makes for trouble, sooner or later. Not everybody hereabouts is a big harmless bear like him. And sometimes folks get the wrong notion about a girl dancing in a saloon."

"I guess you're right," the girl admitted. "I won't dance any more. That is," she added, glancing up at him through the silken veil of her dark lashes, "unless you would like to dance with me. They're playing a waltz."

"Ma'am, I'd plumb love to," Lane accepted with alacrity. In a moment they were on the floor, and the girl quickly realized that she had found a dance partner worthy of her own outstanding ability.

The pair attracted plenty of attention. So much that gradually the floor cleared and the other couples stood on the outskirts, watching as the tall cowboy and his tiny partner went through a series of intricate steps that brought forth a burst of applause.

"Just about the finest couple I ever saw on a floor," a gray-haired old puncher declared to his table companions. "They're sure worth watchin'. And it's sure fine to be young. Oh, to be fifty again!"

Glancing over the girl's shoulder, Lane observed Mexican Pete watching them. There was a look in his eyes that was not hard to interpret.

"Plumb loco about her," he mused. "Well, I don't blame him. And he's one fine looking feller himself, even though he is a mite on in years. Darn!"

They finished the dance to the accompaniment of more applause and went back to the table. Lane glanced about the room as they sat down. To his surprise he recognized a man just sauntering in. There was no mistaking that lean, cadaverous figure, the dead-black eyes and the utterly emotionless face. It was Jess Rader, proprietor of the First Chance.

"Come in to see how business is with his competitor, I reckon," Lane told himself. "I've a notion Pete is doing about as much as Rader, and he gets a heap nicer crowd."

Rader glanced about, hesitated, then sauntered over to where Mexican Pete was standing. The Alhambra owner bowed courteously and voiced a greeting.

Jess Rader did not reply for a moment. He stood with his opaque looking eyes fixed on the other's face. Abruptly he leaned close and apparently voiced a question.

The effect on Mexican Pete was remarkable. He stepped back, his eyes widened. What could be seen of his face between hat brim and beard paled perceptibly. He appeared at a loss how to answer.

Jess Rader grinned, or rather, his sunken face went through a contortion doubtless intended for a grin. It reminded Mort Lane of the drawn-back lips of an enraged Gila Monster revealing its grooved teeth dripping venom. Then Rader turned on his heel and walked out, glancing neither to right nor left. Mexican Pete stared after him, seemingly dazed. Slowly he walked to the back room of the saloon and closed the door behind him.

"Now what in blazes was that all about?" Lane asked himself. Abruptly he was conscious of his pretty table companion's reproachful voice—

"Tall Senor," she said, lapsing into the Spanish mode of address, "you pay not the least attention to what Maria is saying."

Lane came back to his immediate surroundings with a start. "Ma'am, I heard every word you said," he protested. "I was just sort of giving things a once-over."

"Yes, I suppose that is in line with your work," the girl replied. "I heard about you being appointed town marshal. I hope you find everything all right in here."

"I've a notion Pete takes care of things himself without any help from

the law," Lane nodded. "Reckon he always runs an orderly place."

"Yes, he always does, so far as he is able," the girl said. "But of course things do sometimes get out of hand in any place where men drink together."

"Do you like this sort of a place?" Lane asked curiously.

"Not particularly," she admitted, "but it gets lonely sitting in our cabin by myself."

"You live with Pete?"

There was the suspicion of a smile on Maria's red lips and a dancing light in her eyes as she answered the question.

"Yes," she said simply, "I do."

CHAPTER V

To Each His Own

MORT LANE went to bed that night in a very bad frame of mind, and angry with himself because of it.

"You loco jughead! what's the matter with you?" he demanded of himself. "What's the big notion, getting all het up over a dance hall girl?"

But just as he was dropping off to sleep, he murmured, half aloud, "Wonder if she can cook, too?"

But the following morning Mort Lane had things to think about other than black-lashed eyes, red lips and conjectures as to the lady's culinary abilities. There was a vicious row in Jess Rader's saloon. But by the time the marshal arrived, peace had been restored and the combatants patched up, after a fashion. Lane glanced over the deceptively quiet room and singled out Jess Rader.

"We've had about enough of this sort of thing, Rader," he told him. "A little more of it and I'll close you up."

"Don't tell me how to run my business," the saloonkeeper growled reply.

"I'm not telling you how to run your business," Lane instantly countered. "But I am telling you how to run your place. We don't want the kind of place you've been running, and we don't propose to have it."

"Lane, you'll stick your nose into my affairs once too often," Rader said.

"Yes, once too often," Lane told him. "And after that you won't have any affairs, not in this town. And if you're looking for trouble, I'll fill you so full of it, it'll run out of your ears."

He paused, looking Rader full in the eye, his hands swinging loosely at his sides.

For a moment Rader's unwinking black eyes met the marshal's cold gaze. Then he glanced aside, muttered something under his breath and slouched away. Lane turned his back on him and walked from the saloon. As he passed out, he heard a voice remark, "Jess had better listen to good advice and not go lookin' for any trouble. That lawman sure aims to be accommodatin'."

Nevertheless, Lane did not underestimate Jess Rader and his trouble making potentialities. Rader was a snake-blooded proposition and he had a following, a following that was constantly being augmented by new arrivals. For Grave Town was booming. The mines were speeding up production. The cowmen of the section were already making the town their headquarters and doing their part to increase the prosperity of the community.

The rumor that the railroad would pass that way was no longer a rumor but an established fact. All of which tended to bring in newcomers. Some had legitimate enterprise in mind, but there were others on the lookout for easy pickings and not at all particular as to how they came by them. A ruthless and enterprising individual, such as Rader, could become the leader of a faction that would be inimical to law and order, to say the least.

"Tombstone, Arizona, and the Cochise county outlaws all over again," Lane told himself. "Well, Tombstone took care of 'em in the end, and I reckon the same will go for Grave Town."

NOT many days later, Mort Lane was treated to an example of Jess Rader's shrewd vindictiveness. The Mayor brought the word. He came hurrying into the marshal's office, in the front of the new calaboose, with concern written large on his face.

"Jack Richardson's in town," he announced.

Lane did not appear particularly impressed. "That so?" he replied. "And who's Jack Richardson?"

"You mean to say you never heard of him?" exclaimed the mayor. "He's one of the coldest killers in the Southwest, and folks say he's got the fastest gunhand in Texas."

Lane still did not appear impressed. "Other things besides fast gunhands," he observed.

"Yes, but you can't shrug off the kind of a hand Jack Richardson has," the mayor countered grimly. "Nobody's ever been able to shade him on the draw. Don't know how many men he's killed, always in 'self-defense'. Richardson's method is to taunt the other feller into reaching. Then he downs him before he can clear leather. I don't believe there is a man anywhere who can shade him. He's plumb cold-blooded and he's got an itch to kill. And I tell you, Lane, Jess Rader brought him here to get you or run you out of town."

"That so?" Lane repeated.

"Yes, darn it, that's so!" exploded the mayor, losing his temper. "I'm going to swear in a posse of a dozen men right now. Richardson brought two more mean looking hellions with him. He's here looking for trouble. Well, we'll give it to him."

Mort Lane rose to his feet. "Never mind the posse," he said quietly. "Where is Richardson now? In Rader's place?"

"No," the mayor replied. "Rader's too smart for that. He's in Mexican Pete's Alhambra. Reckon he knows you drop in there every evening."

"Think I'll drop in right now," Lane said cheerfully. "If Richardson is here on legitimate business and behaves himself, we can't very well ask him to move on. If he isn't—well, we'll see."

Silencing the mayor's protests, he sauntered out.

Lane had no trouble spotting Jack Richardson the moment he entered the Alhambra. He was sitting at a corner table with two companions. He had a face that was corpselike in its pallor, a pallor accentuated by the blackness of his lank hair worn so long it almost swept his coat collar.

His eyes were also so pale as to cause the sockets to give an impression of being empty. But in their depths was a cold glitter, like dagger points in the sun. He was powerfully built with abnormally long arms ending in long bony hands that resembled spear points as they hung limply by his sides.

All this Mort Lane saw in one swift, all-embracing glance. Without paying further attention to the unsavory trio, he sauntered to the bar and ordered a drink. He was not in the least surprised, however, when a hand touched him on the shoulder. He knew that Richardson had risen from his table by the rush that suddenly fell over the room. He turned slowly to face the killer.

Before speaking, Richardson looked the marshal up and down. His voice was like the harsh rumble of a carnivorous beast when he finally opened his lips.

"Town marshal, eh?" he remarked, his gaze fixed on Lane's badge. "Understand you set up to be considerably salty. Hmmm! From where I come from, salty jiggers don't have to hide behind a tin plate!"

The result of the viciously offensive remark was explosively instant and utterly unexpected.

LANE did not reach, knowing well that he would have no chance against the other's lightning draw. His left fist shot out and crashed against Richardson's jaw. As the killer reeled back, half-dazed, pawing at his guns, Lane whipped his own Colt from its sheath and bent the barrel over Richardson's head. He went down, knocked senseless, blood pouring from his split scalp.

In the same move, Lane whirled sideways and around. From the tail of his eye he had seen Richardson's table companions come to their feet with a rush.

But even as he turned, a voice range out, "Do not move, Senors, this thing packs eleven buckshot to the cartridge!"

Elbows resting on the bar, stood Mexican Pete, a double-barreled shotgun clamped against his shoulder. The yawning twin muzzles were lined with the two men at the corner table, who stood rigid, faces black with fury.

"You will raise your hands, shoulder-high, Senors," said Mexican Pete, his voice quietly courteous, as always. "Now

you will be so kind as to turn around and face the wall. So."

"Okay, Pete," Lane chuckled, and crossed the room, careful to keep out of line with the shotgun. He plucked the pair's guns from their holsters and tossed them into a corner. Then he ran his hands over their bodies, extracted still another gun from a shoulder holster, and a knife from the back of a neck.

"Reckon that's all," he remarked when the weapons had joined the other hardware in the corner. "Stay put a minute, both of you."

He crossed back to Richardson's unconscious form and removed his guns. Then he called to the pair in the corner, "All right, come over here and pick up this sidewinder and pack him out. Step lively, now, if you're not looking for a pistol whipping, too."

The pair sullenly obeyed, glaring murder but discreetly making no threatening move.

"Where we takin' him, to the doctor?" one growled as they staggered under the weight of Richardson's heavy form.

"You're packing him to the calaboose," Lane told them grimly. "And when the three of you finally get out, you'll be tripping over your whiskers."

The tense room rocked with laughter. To the accompaniment of deafening cheers, the marshal marched his prisoners to the calaboose where the recently appointed jailer took charge. He was an old former cowboy whose badly broken and poorly set leg barred him from further range work. But his hands were as good as ever and he could have had seven notches filed on the butt of his old single-action Smith & Wesson.

"Lay the dang wind spider on the table there," he told the two bearers. "I'll patch him up. Had considerable experience at that sort of chore. All right, you two—in the cells."

HALF an hour later, Jack Richardson, still dazed, his aching head swathed with bandages, staggered into a cell to mingle his curses with those of his companions. And very shortly afterward, the three crestfallen badmen were haled before the mayor, who held impromptu court in the marshal's office. After hearing the evidence, he at once sentenced them to six months for disturbing the peace.

"You handled it plumb perfect," the mayor congratulated Mort Lane. "If you'd shot it out with them and downed all three, it wouldn't be half as good. You made Richardson look plumb silly. Everybody in town is laughing at him, and the story will spread all over Texas. Nobody will ever be scairt of him again. I figure when he gets out his nerve will be plumb busted, and I predict somebody will kill him inside of a year."

The mayor was right in both surmises.

That night, Mexican Pete had a highly unpleasant interview with Jess Rader.

"So you double-crossed me, eh?" Rader snarled at the Alhambra owner, his death's-head face livid with anger. "Okay, I'm writing a letter tonight."

"Go ahead and write," Mexican Pete told him. "I'm tired of hiding. I'll take what's coming to me."

"Uh-huh," Rader promised vindictively as he turned away, "a short haircut and a suit of stripes!"

Due to the part he played in the discomfiting of the three killers, Mexican Pete's Alhambra became more popular than ever with the better element of Grave Town. Maria welcomed Mort Lane with even greater warmth, but Pete himself appeared to avoid him. Several times Lane intercepted his gaze resting on the two of them as they sat at table together, and it seemed that he read pain in the Mexican's fine dark eyes.

"I've got to stop going in there," he told himself vigorously. "I'm not going to see her any more.

But he did. He just couldn't stay away.

And then one day, not long after the incident of Jack Richardson, Mort Lane made a startling discovery. He was sauntering along Main Street when he observed Mexican Pete and Maria walking the opposite side of the street. They paused before a shop window and something they saw appeared to amuse them greatly. They laughed aloud, looking into each other's eyes, and the laugh of one was the echo of the laugh of the other.

Mort Lane stopped dead, and stared.

"Leaping horntoads!" he exclaimed.

"Well, of all the dumb yearlin's, I'm the dumbest! Eyes plumb the same! Nose plumb the same! Same way of moving their hands! The same smile! Well, I'll be branded for a sheepherder! Why didn't I tumble to it before?"

That night he walked into the Alhambra, sat down opposite Maria and without preamble shot a question at her.

"Maria," he said, "just what is Pete to you, anyhow?"

The dark-eyed girl's silvery laughter trilled forth.

"Tall Senor, you make the joke of Maria," she replied. "You know very well he is my *padre*—my father!"

CHAPTER VI

Mexican Pete's Secret

THE following day, Lane deliberately sought out Mexican Pete. "Want to ask a big favor of you," he said.

"It is granted—anything within my power," the other instantly responded.

"I want to marry your daughter," said Lane.

Mexican Pete did not appear particularly surprised. But he slowly shook his head.

"I greatly regret, Senor, that I cannot give my consent," he said.

Mort Lane was decidedly taken back. "B-but why not?" he sputtered. "I know I'm not good enough for her, but I'm not so terribly bad, am I?"

"You are one of the finest young men I ever knew," Mexican Pete replied. "It is because of my high regard for you that I cannot consent to an alliance that will bring you in touch with trouble and disgrace."

"What do you mean?" Lane demanded.

"Senor," the other answered, "I will tell you what you will learn soon enough anyhow. I am a fugitive from justice."

"That so?" Lane said. "What did you do to get the law after you?"

"Senor, I killed a man."

"Well," Lane replied c h e e r f u l l y, "from what I've seen of you, I figure he must have had a killing coming."

"He did," Mexican Pete said grimly, "but just the same I fear I must pay for the deed with a term of imprisonment. I was arrested for the shooting, which took place in the course of a card game, and taken back to stand trial. While awaiting the action of the grand jury, I escaped from confinement and fled to Mexico.

"I could not bear the idea of being separated from my daughter for a long period of time. I had seen little enough of her during recent years as it was. I managed to get in touch with her; she was living with her dead mother's relations in El Paso county. My wife was an American girl from Texas. Maria joined me, knowing nothing of my predicament. I heard of the gold strike and thought that here should be a good place to hide, and to perhaps prosper.

"I had saved some money. So I grew the beard and changed my manner of dress, and always wore my hat pulled low. Then I came here from Mexico. But the man Jess Rader recognized me. He threatened to expose me unless I would work with him. When he brought Richardson, the gunman, here to kill you, he insisted that I allow the crime to take place in my establishment. I pretended to agree, hoping that I could see a way to help you."

MORT LANE'S eyes were sparkling with excitement. "You sure saw a way, all right," he chuckled. "And Rader turned you in?"

"That's right. He wrote a letter to the authorities telling them of my present whereabouts. Perhaps it is for the best. I am weary of hiding and running away."

"And where did he write the letter to?" Lane asked, although he felt sure he already knew the answer.

"To McMullen county, Senor, do not you recognize me now, despite the beard I grew and the gray that has touched my hair since last we met?"

Mort Lane's chuckle was one of pure delight. "Just what is your name?" he asked gravely. "Your real one, not the one folks call you here?"

"It is Manuel Pedro Garcia, Senor."

Mort Lane seized him by the shoulders and shook him vigorously.

"You darn old horntoad!" he whooped. "I've been hunting all over this end of creation for you, and all the time you were right here under my nose. Read this!"

He fished a crumpled letter from his pocket. Mexican Pete, wide-eyed, read the laconic response of the McMullen county authorities."

"Senor," he said, his voice quivering with emotion, "I cannot believe it."

"Maybe not, but it's true," Lane told him. "And, by the way, I've a notion from one or two things Maria said, that you'd like to get out of the saloon business. Right?"

"Yes, I would, for her sake," Mexican Pete replied. "But it and gambling are about all I know, and gambling is an uncertain way to make a living, to say the least."

"Well, you can get out any time you are of a mind to," Lane said. He briefly explained the filing of the claim in the name of Pedro Lopez.

"And the way the money has been piling up, old Judge Price, the trustee down at Buckley, has been writing letters complaining that he doesn't like the responsibility of looking after it," Lane concluded. "Tomorrow we'll ride down to Buckley and you can take over your holdings. And now what I asked you about a little while ago—may I marry Maria, if she'll have me?"

"Senor," smiled Mexican Pete, "if Maria agrees, and I am sure she will, you have my blessing."

They sealed the bargain with a hearty handshake.

"And so Jess Rader spotted you, eh?" Lane remarked. "How come?"

"He was present at the time of the shooting," Mexican Pete explained. "I think the man in question was a friend of his."

"Chances are he was," agreed Lane, adding grimly, "We'll take up the matter of Senor Rader when we get back from Buckley."

Before nightful, Mexican Pete had sold the Alhambra to his head bartender, payment to be made from the profits of the establishment.

The following morning, he and Mort Lane headed for Buckley.

"*Vaya usted con Dios,*" Maria told them, her eyes bright with happiness, voicing that old, old benediction with which the people of *Mejico* speed the well loved traveller on his way—*Vaya usted con Dios.* Go you with God!

OTHER eyes watched them go, eyes glittering with hate. Jess Rader muttered a curse as they disappeared over a rise. Shortly afterward, Rader saddled a horse and also rode out of town.

Lane and his companion spent the night at the Cross C ranchhouse, where big Val Jackson, the cowboy with whom Lane had the rukus in the Alhambra was range boss. They were warmly welcomed by Jackson, the Cross C bunch and old Tom Blivens, the owner.

"Us fellers will be down on our southwest range tomorrow afternoon," Jackson told them the following morning. "We'll keep an eye open for you and we'll ride back to the house together. I want a chance to even up for that big jackpot Pete bluffed me out of with a busted flush. Uh-huh, we'll have another game tomorrow night and I aims to set down poor and rise up rich!"

It was late afternoon when Lane and Pete reached Buckley. They visited Judge Price and quickly transacted their business. The judge was glad to hand over his responsibility to Mexican Pete. They spent the night in the cowtown and set out on their return trip shortly after sunrise the next morning.

North of Buckley the trail ran through rugged, heavily wooded hills, their dark slopes slashed by occasional narrow and gloomy canyons. About mid-afternoon they were drawing near the southern line of the Cross C holdings and not far from the northern terminus of the hills. They were passing beneath the wide-spreading branches of a great tree when Lane glanced up at a sound of rustling in the leaves over their heads—glanced up just an instant too late.

Two ropes snaked down from amid the foliage. Tight loops settled over their shoulders and were instantly jerked tight, wrenching them from their saddles to strike the ground with stunning force. Before they could make a move, hard, sinewy bodies were all over

them. Their arms were pinned to their sides by turn on turn of the ropes, the knots made fast. Then, still dazed by the fall, they were lifted back to their saddles and their ankles securely bound to the stirrup irons. Their guns were plucked from their holsters.

A cold chill went over Mort Lane as he gazed on the dark savage faces of their captors.

"Renegade Mescalero Apaches," he muttered to his companion. "Plumb pizen! Pete, we're on a bad spot, and it's all my fault. I should have remembered that these people have long memories for blood-feuds and have been on the lookout. Reckon those five Andy Webb and I did for our first night on the mesa belonged to this bunch. I reported those killings to the Indian agent, of course, and I reckon the word got back to their folks. Chances are they've just been biding their time and waiting for a chance at me. Blazes! Why did I have to drag you into it, though!"

"Never mind about that," said Mexican Pete. "Where do you suppose they are taking us?"

"To their village back in the hills somewhere," Lane guessed. "We'll be mighty lucky if we don't end up the main events of a barbecue party."

CHAPTER VII

Showdown

HOWEVER, Mort Lane was wrong in his surmise. Soon the Apaches turned into a narrow canyon which they followed for some miles, finally coming to a halt in front of an old but tightly built cabin almost hidden by the encroaching growth. It was doubtless the former home of some prospector or trapper. Here the captives were dismounted and, their arms still bound to their sides, herded into the cabin, which consisted of two rooms.

They were hustled across to the inner room, a door was slammed shut and a bolt shot. For some minutes there came from the outer room guttural conversation, which neither understod. Then the door to the outside opened and closed and they heard the sound of horses' hoofs fading away back down the canyon.

Mort Lane listened intently to sounds in the outer room.

"Left one man to keep watch on us," he told Mexican Pete. "Dang these ropes, anyhow! If we had our hands loose we might take a chance on bustin' down the door and rushing him. Chances are he'd do for us both, but that would be better than the stake and a slow fire."

"Senor," whispered the Mexican, "I believe we have a chance. My hands are very slender and they are dealer's hands, and my wrists are supple. I managed to steal a little space while they were tying me up without them catching on. If you can just loosen the knot a little with your teeth, I believe I can win free."

His heart beating fast with revived hope, Lane went to work on the knots. Due to Mexican Pete's clever subterfuge, the ropes already were loose about his flexible wrists. After nearly an hour of effort, his mouth bleeding, his gums torn and sore, Lane managed to loosen them enough more to allow Pete to slip the strands up to his elbows. His deft fingers quickly undid his companion's knots. Another moment and both were free.

"If we only had a gun!" Lane breathed. "I can knock that door down with my shoulder in one rush."

"We have one," Pete whispered back. "These people never heard of a sleeve holster. I have my little double-barreled derringer—my 'gambler's gun'—in my sleeve. They didn't find it when they searched us for weapons."

"Then it's a cinch!" Lane breathed exultantly as Pete slid the stubby little iron into his palm. "I'll hit the door with everything I've got and slew sideways along the wall. You let him have it the second the door goes down. He won't be able to get more than one of us, that's sure."

"And if so, that one will be you," Mexican Pete regretted. "But there is no other way. I am not strong enough to knock down the door. *Adios*, my son, if you die, I promise that you will not die alone."

THEY paused to listen. A smell of wood smoke was drifting into the room. They could hear steps moving about and the clatter of tinware. Evidently the guard had started a fire in the stove and was preparing a meal. So much the better, Lane reasoned. He might have his hands full at the moment they broke out. He motioned Mexican Pete to take up his post beside the door. Then he backed to the far wall, dashed across the room and hurled himself against the flimsy barrier.

There was a crash of splintered wood, a screech of disrupted metal. The door flew open, sagging crazily on one hinge. Lane charged into the room.

The guard was standing by the stove. He whirled around, hand streaking to his holster. The cabin rocked to a double report.

Mort Lane felt the wind of the passing bullet. Then he saw the guard go down, thrashing and clawing as the second barrel of Mexican Pete's derringer let go. He was dead when Lane reached him, fist poised to strike.

Lane swept the cabin with a swift glance.

"There are our guns on the table!" he exclaimed. He made a dive for his Colts and holstered them.

"Now if they just didn't take our horses with them," he hoped. "I don't think they did. I didn't hear any irons on the rocks, just the thud of unshod hoofs when they rode away. Come on, let's look."

"What shall we do?" asked Mexican Pete as they hurried from the cabin.

"Streak it down the canyon," Lane instantly decided. "Can't risk going the other way. It may be a box, and if it is, they would have us cornered. We may meet them coming back, but we'll have to chance it. I don't figure we will. They've been gone only a little more than an hour and the chances are wherever they are headed for isn't overly close. What I can't understand is why they went off and left us in the first place. Something almighty funny about all this."

"There are our horses, under a lean-to beside the cabin, and with the rigs still on them," exclaimed Mexican Pete.

"Let's go," barked Lane. "It's already getting gloomy in this crack and that will be in our favor if we do have a shindig. Sift sand, feller. If we can just make the trail outside we'll be okay."

Down the darkening canyon they sped, as fast as the rough and broken ground would permit. Lane strained his ears to catch the first sound of approaching horses, but as the miles rolled past under their clicking irons, his spirits rose.

"Believe we're going to make it," he shouted to his companion. "Can't be much more than another mile to the mouth of this crack, and it's getting dark in here fast."

A stretch strewn with loose boulders and choked with brush forced them to slow down. Finally, however, Lane uttered an exultant yelp. Directly ahead the canyon broadened and brightened.

When love and happiness beckon, Kay Starret leaves home and friends to head for Cherokee Valley—only to arrive in the midst of a flaming range feud that brings heartbreak and tragedy!

THE GIRL FROM THE EAST

By

ROE RICHMOND

•

A DEEPLY-APPEALING NOVELET FEATURED NEXT ISSUE!

The mouth and the open land were before them.

A moment more and they crashed from the gorge and swerved into the northbound trail. And just as they reached it, a band of seven riders burst from the brush that flanked the south wall of the canyon less than two hundred yards distant. Foremost was a tall, lean white man. Mort Lane recognized him instantly.

"Jess Rader!" he shouted. "Now I see it! They were holding us for Rader! Ride, Pete, ride. They're out to do for both of us!"

A storm of yells arose as Rader and his men sighted them, and a roar of gunfire. Bullets whistled past or kicked up spurts of dust at their feet. Mexican Pete's roan screamed with pain, bounded forward and sped up the trail in an astonishing burst of speed. Lane's great sorrel crashed after him, snorting his indignation at being distanced.

CROUCHING low in his saddle, Mort Lane glanced back. The pursuers were thundering after them, but he exultantly realized that the Apaches' mustangs were no match for Rojo and the roan. He chuckled with satisfaction.

"I'd like to stop and settle matters with you, Senor Rader," he muttered, "but I reckon I'd better not. That is unless you're loco enough to pull ahead of your bunch. But I reckon you've got too much savvy to do that."

Rojo was quickly overhauling the speeding roan. Another moment and they were shoulder to shoulder. A hundred yards more and Lane realized his companion was dropping back. "What's the matter?" he shouted, twisting in his hull. "Want me to slow up?"

"My horse," Mexican Pete shouted back. "He's hit, bad. He'll go down any minute. Already floundering."

Breathing an oath, Lane tightened his grip on the reins and held Rojo in until the roan was abreast of him.

"Flop on behind me," he yelled to Pete. "Hustle!"

"Go on," the Mexican jolted back. "He can't carry the double weight. Go on and save yourself. Maria is waiting for you."

"Up behind me!" Lane roared again. "Do you want us both to stop here and get killed? Rojo can pack us both."

Mexican Pete obeyed the order, and barely had he transferred to the red-sorrel when the roan faltered in his side nd fell, to lie in a quivering heap.

And now what had been an exhilarating chase changed to a grim race with death. Slowly but surely, the pursuers closed in on the overburdened horse. Bullets began coming close. Mort Lane glanced back, his face bleak. Again less than two hundred yards separated them.

"We can't do it," he shouted to his companion. "We'll go through that thicket ahead, unfork on the far side and shoot it out. Anyhow, I aim to take Jess Rader along with me."

They crashed through the thicket, the trail curving sharply and giving them a moment's surcease from the storm of lead. They bulged out the far side. Lane loosened his feet in the stirrups, pulled Rojo to a halt.

"Look!" Mexican Pete suddenly yelled. "Coming this way!"

Galloping across the prairie toward them were nearly a dozen horsemen.

"It's Val Jackson and the Cross C boys!" whooped Lane. "They heard the shooting. Come on, Val, lend a hand. We're on a spot."

THE Cross C bunch charged up to the trail just as Jess Rader and the breeds burst from the thicket to be met by a hail of bullets. Down went the dark-faced riders as the Cross C bunch grimly closed in, guns blazing.

"Rader's getting away!" shouted Mexican Pete.

The lean killer had whirled his big bay and was speeding back the way he had come. Even as Pete spoke, the thicket swallowed him and he vanished from sight.

"Unfork!" Lane yelped to his companion. "I'll get the sidewinder!"

Mexican Pete leaped to the ground. Lane sent Rojo flashing in pursuit of Rader. He settled himself in the saddle and called on the red horse to do his utmost.

Rojo responded gallantly. He slugged his head above the bit, snorted, rolled his eyes and hurled himself after the straining bay.

Rader was well mounted, but the bay was no match for Rojo. Steadily the red horse closed the distance. They reached the canyon mouth with Rader shooting over his shoulder. Lane heard the whistle of the passing slugs but he grimly held his own fire and gave all his attention to riding. Rader swerved his horse and darted into the canyon with Rojo less than a score of yards behind.

Suddenly Rader gave it up. He jerked his horse to a sliding halt, whirled him about and faced his pursuer, gun flaming. Lane dropped the split reins to the ground, whipped out his Colts and answered Rader shot for shot.

It was almost full dark in the canyon now. The guns spurted reddish fire. The gorge roared and echoed to the reports as the maddened horses plunged and reared. Their riders were shadowy, weaving wraiths blasting death at one another through the gloom.

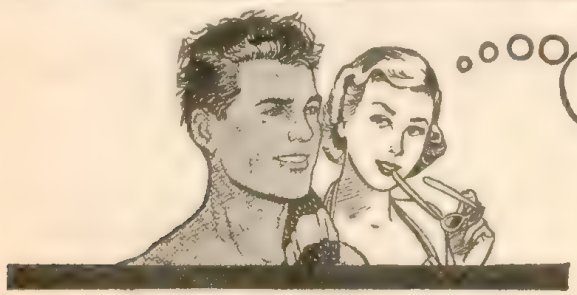
Mort Lane felt the burn of a bullet searing his ribs. Another stung on his cheek. A third turned his hat sideways on his head. Then suddenly Jess Rader screamed, a high-pitched, racking scream of agony and terror. He reeled in his saddle, tried with straining hand to lift his gun for a final shot, and could not. He plunged sideways and thudded to the ground, quivered and was still. As Lane dismounted stiffly, the Cross C riders came thundering into the canyon.

"Well, I see everything's plumb in hand," remarked Val Jackson, dismounting and peering into Jess Rader's dead face. "You okay, Mort? Fine! Catch that bay, boys, and bring him along for Pete to ride. And let's get goin'. Enough of this darn foolishment. It's gettin' late and we got somethin' important on hand. We got a poker game set for tonight. Let's go!"

As they rode into the Cross C ranchhouse yard, Mort Lane suddenly chuckled aloud.

"What's so funny, feller?" asked Jackson.

"I was just thinking," explained Lane, "that that school Andy Webb and I plan to build will come in mighty handy, in a few years, for Maria and me!"



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WATER BRINGS War

Will Tasker wanted to establish his own home on the range—but first he had to make hay!

by **FRANK P. CASTLE**

WILL TASKER rode fast down Thunder Creek road. His shell-belt and gun made a heavy, unaccustomed weight after hanging for months behind his kitchen door. His head felt as big as a hornets' nest, and hurt like a boil that size. The whole front of him was plastered with mud.

He turned in at the Keegan ranch. This was his first visit in the three months he had been here, though the Keegans were his nearest neighbors. He had heard gossip at Abel Crowe's store that they were shiftless people. Their place tallied with the gossip—fields hip-

high in weeds, a sway-backed barn, a shabby house with some broken windows boarded up. Breakfast smoke corkscrewed from a kitchen chimney. He dismounted and stalked across the yard. A lean hound yapped at him dispiritedly and ran under the house.

A boy came from the barn, saw him, and approached across the yard. He was younger than Will, but about his size, lean and tight-mouthed, wearing patched but clean shirt and levis, with run-over boots.

"You want something?" he asked.

"I'm Tasker," Will growled. "Been working the old Fentriss place since spring—"

"Heard the talk down at Crowe's when you moved in. I'm Pete Keegan. What you want, Tasker?"

"Somebody stole my water last night," Will said bluntly. "Closed my gate at the ditch, bent a gun barrel over my head and laid me out in one of my diversion channels."

"You look it," Keegan said. "I'm sorry to hear this, Tasker. Stealing water is bad—"

"It's the last time mine will be stolen," Will snapped. "I was told you Keegans didn't pay your water district dues this year, so you're not entitled to a drop from the ditch. I got one to four in the morning as my hours to open my gate—a right convenient time for somebody to use what I paid for. Keegan, you're sure as blazes not going to grow hay at my expense!"

The boy came forward a step.

"Now that," he said unevenly, "is something you'll take back! We've stood plenty—more than humans ought to—and I know there's talk behind our backs that we steal. I can't stop all the loose tongues along the creek single-handed, but nobody's going to walk into this yard and call me a water thief. Take it back, blast you!"

He was set on a hair trigger. Before Will could answer, Keegan leaped at him, swinging. He missed, and Tasker threw a solid punch to the side of his head. The boy went down hard, rolled, and came up with fists windmilling. One skidded across Will's cheek, and he saw stars. The pain in his head increased. He got a handful of shirt, jerked Keegan close, and pounded him again. Keegan hit the yard's hard-packed dirt once more and lay still a moment, gasping.

Will frowned. A fight was just what he wanted, right now, but this boy didn't stand a chance against him—

The kitchen door at the house banged and a hurricane in skirts rushed across the yard. He had a momentary glimpse of a girl, so small and thin she seemed to be all great dark eyes and free-flowing black hair. Then her first slap stung his face, and was followed by two more. Will vainly tried to hold her off.

Keegan grabbed the girl and pulled her back.

"Let be, sis!" he commanded. "Tasker, I'd enjoy a fight if I was fed up and had my full weight. As it is, I got to call it quits. You better ride. Don't try anything reckless with that gun. My dad has got his bedroom window open and his rifle centered on you—"

"The fighting's all done," Will said. "And I'm sorry—"

"You ought to be!" the girl blazed. "I heard your talk—would have come sooner, but I had to get dressed. Accusing us of stealing water! Look at the weeds we're raising. You think we'd plug your ditch to help that kind of crop grow?"

"I didn't do any thinking at all," Will said. "Just had the world's biggest headache and was in a hurry to take it out on somebody, I guess."

"You look like you'd tangled with a bobcat," the girl said brusquely. "Come inside. That cut over your ear needs mending."

She turned away. Pete Keegan grinned.

"Go ahead, Tasker," he advised. "When Liz talks like that, she's not to be crossed."

Will grinned in response. Liz Keegan. She was a girl who made looking mighty easy. He decided he wanted to see a lot more of her.

BERT KEEGAN was a gaunt, pale man in a big bed. But there was intelligence in his eyes and vigor in his voice.

"I was working days for Abel Crowe when one of his mules kicked me in the back, Tasker," he said. "That was a year ago. I can't walk good yet. Pete

and Liz have tried mighty hard, but they're young and this is a big place. I know some are beginning to call us the shiftless Keegans. When I can use my legs again I'm going to kill that lie quick."

Will was angry with himself for having accepted talk about these people without checking for himself.

"You own your grass?" he asked.

"No. Had to mortgage it to Crowe to pay doctor bills. I'm behind on interest payments, but he hasn't pressed me. I've been gaining lately—know I'll walk soon. Give me a free year, then, and I'll be in the clear."

Will nodded. This was the finest hay country he had ever seen; the ranchers down in Lodgepole Basin bought all they could get, at good prices. For this reason, and a hungry desire to climb down from a Basin working saddle and be his own boss, Tasker had jumped at the chance offered him when old Tom Fentriss, a long-time friend, had pulled out to spend his sunset years in California. Will had inherited some money from an aunt, and had a little saved; he could just swing the deal for old Tom's place.

Now, his plan was to work and save, and next spring bring in some stock. Will figured he could handle fifty head of feeders and make even more out of beef than he could from hay.

There was a stumbling-block, though. Two things were needed to make hay-crops here—hard work and water. He knew he could supply all of the first that was needed, and for the second he depended on the big ditch which tapped Thunder Creek five miles south and then snaked along the base of the low hills behind his place.

"The water district dues took the last of my cash," he told Keegan. "In addition, I poured out a lot of sweat clearing my section of the ditch and digging channels across my grass. I'm not standing still while somebody profits from that!"

He had already described what had happened last night—how he had closed one of the cumbersome wooden gates in the big ditch and had opened the other, diverting the flow onto his land. Then he had gone to make coffee for keeping awake until he had to shut it off again at four. Maybe he had dozed a little.

Suddenly he was aware that the murmur of running water had stopped. He went out in a hurry, and a gun barrel was bent viciously over his head, from behind. Next thing he knew, it was dawn, and the channels across his grass were barely damp. The rest of his water had been stolen.

"Don't know who along the ditch would do such a thing," Keegan said. "Pete heard talk at Crowe's that somebody didn't like you getting the Fentriss place. Just a rumor—no name. Maybe he's trying to grab it by drying you out and breaking you."

"He'll find me harder to handle if he tries again," Will said grimly.

"You got good acreage," Keegan said. "Wish I'd been in a position to dicker with old Tom when he pulled out. Your piece and mine are a natural unit; they should be together. It would make the best ranch on Thunder Creek."

Liz came in.

"It's nearly noon," she said. "You go along home, Will, so I can tidy Dad's room."

Will was startled at the time he had spent here. He grinned, rising. This was the most direct-talking girl he had ever known, but there was a soft heart beneath her brusque exterior. The way she had cared for his hurts had told him this. And she had insisted on giving him breakfast, though it was obvious this was something the Keegans couldn't afford. She went out with him to the yard.

"If you need help," she said, "you call on us. Pete's a crack shot with Dad's rifle, and me—I can scream fit to wake the dead. We'll be of some use."

Will, who had never needed help in a fight, still nodded his thanks. He swung into saddle and gigged his horse reluctantly out to the road, warmed by her parting smile.

Five miles later, he dismounted at the crossroads. This was the nearest to a settlement there was along Thunder Creek—the store, a blacksmith shop, hay scales, a pair of steam balers in a storage shed. All of it owned by spare, sharp-eyed Abel Crowe. He also was water-master for the district, and had

assigned the post-midnight hours to Will, explaining they were his due as a newcomer. He listened frowningly to what had happened.

"This is the first time there's been trouble along the ditch, Tasker," he said. "Jake Alfred draws water just ahead of you, and Fitch Lewis just after. I can't see either of them stealing a drop; they get more than enough at their regular times for all their needs. I've never listened to all the palaver about the Keegans, but I'm wondering—"

"Don't," Will said. "I saw them this morning. They didn't take my water. They couldn't use it. Their fields are full of weeds."

"They couldn't make a hay crop," Crowe agreed. "But their land lies on both sides of the ditch, and Pete might be trying to lay out a hidden patch of beans for quick cash. He wouldn't need much water for them. A couple of quick steals would be enough—"

Will grunted. Maybe he'd missed a trick by not taking a look at the Keegan section of the ditch, to find if it was muddy. But he shook his head stubbornly.

"I think they're good people, Crowe. I don't believe they'd steal."

"I didn't say I believe that, either," the merchant said. "I hold a mortgage on their place, and I'm being as easy as I can with them. But, as water-master, I got to look at every possibility."

This was true, Tasker had to agree. He talked a little more, but Crowe seemed inattentive, as though he had something on his mind. Will mentioned what Bert Keegan had said about Tasker's place and his forming a natural unit.

"I took a look, riding away, and I think he's right, Crowe," Will said. "Especially for fattening beef, like I got in mind. Also, he told me somebody wanted the Fentriss place and might not like it that old Tom sold out to me. You hear anything about that?"

"No," Crowe answered, looking annoyed. "Anyone along the creek would buy more acreage, if he could get it. Now, Tasker, I'm busy—"

Will cleared his throat. "I'd like a few things," he said. "Flour, bacon—"

Crowe looked at him sharply. Will's store account was already higher than the merchant usually allowed. First hay cutting was due in two weeks. The weather had been dry and hot. There was sudden tightness in Will's throat. He'd heard about those who had gone broke up here before the Thunder Creek ditch had been dug. Without water, the grass burned up fast. And without store credit, a man who couldn't cut and bale would find himself in a bad tight.

"All right," Crowe said abruptly, with the tight-lipped grimace he used for a smile. He nodded to his squint-eyed clerk. "Fitch will give you what you need. I'm not one to press a man when he's having troubles. And forget what I said about the Keegans. I'll check on them, myself."

BACK at his place, Will went to look at the ditch.

Jake Alfred's big spread adjoined his to the south. Alfred was cross-grained and crotchety, but hardly the sort, Tasker thought, to steal a neighbor's water. However, between Alfred's place and his there was a deep, brushy ravine and, moving toward it, he suddenly found a large hole gouged in the ditch embankment. Muddy footsteps showed where somebody had worked hard with pick and shovel, digging a hole and then widening it to a ten-foot tear so that the water could break through and sink in the ravine.

Will stared down at the stagnant pool which had resulted. This was beyond his understanding. The ditch had been breached and his water wasted. He couldn't figure a reason for this, unless it was to cover something else—the flow needed to dampen a field of beans, maybe.

He shied from this thought, because he didn't want to believe it. Going for tools, he filled in the hole and tamped it tight so the water wouldn't gouge it out again. Will made a lengthy, thorough job of this, telling himself it was necessary and that it wouldn't leave him time before evening chores to take a look northward and find out whether any of his water had run down to the Keegan ranch and been used.

He was smoothing down his last shov-

elful when a rifle cracked up the hill, from a ridge line of timber, and lead was a hornet-whine near his face.

For the second time this day, Tasker went headlong into wet mud, diving into the ditch and then scrambling up the other bank, gun out and ready. He thought there was movement among the pines and triggered a fast pair of shots. There was silence, then. A hot evening breeze was rising. Will suddenly remembered the rifle barrel thrust through Bert Keegan's bedroom window this morning.

He waited a long time, hugging the cover of the ditch's damp side wall, before venturing out and up the hill, gun ready. He found where the bushwhacker had lain down and picked a bright .45-90 shellcase out of the pine needles underfoot. The rifleman had fired only one shot and had then pulled out, leaving tracks which headed downhill northward—toward the Keegan place.

Dropping the shellcase in his shirt pocket and reholstering his Colt, Will moved slowly back downhill in twilight, suddenly seeing his ranch as he had planned it to be a year or so from now, with a new house, tight buildings for gear and stock, and beef feeding on this high-country grass.

Then, in another pair of years, he thought he'd be able to spread out some, acquire more acreage and elbow room—more cows, It didn't seem logical to Will that hay should be sold to the Basin ranchers, when cattle would thrive here. There was more money in beef than in feed. As it was, turning the grass into hay benefited only Crowe and his steambalers.

All his plans, however, depended on a successful first summer. And somebody didn't want him to succeed. First a gun barrel bent over his head, and now lead fanning his face. His luck couldn't remain good indefinitely. After the third try, he might be ready for burying.

At the house, a surprise awaited him. Liz Keegan arose from his back stoop, a tired, small girl in a gray dress which had been washed and mended so many times it was shapeless and limp. Yet she stood in it proudly.

"Will," she said hesitantly, "Pete has been gone all day. He didn't tell me where he was going—or when he would be back. He has never done that before."

Tasker grunted. A confirmation of his dark guess as to who had shot at him, maybe. But he refused to jump at believing this. Maybe Pete Keegan wasn't the harassed, worried boy he had seemed this morning. Maybe Liz wasn't just a young girl worn down by poverty and a sick father. But he'd wait and be certain, this time.

"Did you look for him in your patch of beans?" he asked casually.

"No," Liz said. "The beans didn't need work, today."

Then she paused, eyes widening.

"Who told you?" the girl demanded. "We've been trying to keep it quiet. If Pete can find a buyer, without having to sell through Crowe, maybe we can make a payment on the mortgage and have a little money left over. We owe the payment to Crowe, but not the high commission he'd charge."

It sounded reasonable. Everything these Keegans said sounded reasonable. But they were raising beans, somebody had stolen his water, and two attempts had been made to kill him.

"I don't think that Pete is all that's missing from your place," Will said slowly. "Maybe your father's rifle is gone, too."

Liz Keegan's mouth tightened.

"I'm sorry I bothered you," she told him. "I thought this morning maybe we had made a friend. I might have been right—then. But now the way you're talking shows you're thinking us shiftless and thieves again."

Will hurriedly put his hands on her shoulders.

"Liz, no! Wait—"

She slapped him, leaping back from his touch. Liz ran across the yard, caught up the reins of a bony old nag and clawed into saddle. Tears were streaming down her cheeks as the horse headed for the road at an unsteady trot.

STANDING in a circle of lantern-light, Tasker put his weight on the windlass and started cranking down the first of his two gates. The night was dark and the hot breeze still blew. Jake

Alfred would open his gate in a couple of minutes; the water would soon be here.

A sudden crashing movement in the brush beyond the ditch, toward the hill, made him whirl, gun lifting. For a moment he thought it might be strayed stock, from the noise, and then he saw Pete Keegan.

Dried blood masked the boy's face. He had taken a fearful beating, but he was on his feet and he had the long-barreled rifle Will had seen momentarily beside Bert Keegan's bed this morning. Swaying, Pete was trying to lift and aim it. Tasker frowned, covering Pete steadily with his Colt; the boy was wide of his mark. Then startled understanding came. Pete wasn't aiming at him. Will twisted hurriedly around.

Down at the foot of the ditch embankment, the barrel of another rifle was centering on Will Tasker—and, squinting as he hastily lined his sights, was Crowe's store clerk, Fitch.

Will fired instantly, going flat as he pulled trigger. Fitch's rifle whiplashed. Pete Keegan fired and then sagged forward, falling. A high-pitched scream sounded in the darkness and Crowe yelled furiously as Will pushed himself hurriedly up again.

Fitch was down and limply still—as dead as he'd ever be, Will thought. Beyond him a couple of yards, Crowe, gun in hand, was struggling with Liz Keegan.

Tasker leaped down the embankment. He couldn't risk a shot for fear of hitting the girl. He was almost on them when Crowe spun her violently away; she hit Tasker, tangling his feet, and they both fell. Crowe snatched up Will's Colt, and his own gun rocked commandingly.

"Get up, you two," he ordered, exultation in his voice. "Fitch failed me again, like he did last night when he didn't club you hard enough, Tasker, and this afternoon when he missed you. He didn't even finish off Pete Keegan, like he claimed, when the boy ran into him on the hill and guessed that Fitch was waiting for a shot at you. But it don't matter, now. When you're all found, this is

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going to look like a fight between an honest hay rancher and a pair of water thieves."

Tasker stood slowly, lifting Liz to her feet.

"I should have guessed," he growled. "You've got everything else along the creek—now you're after land. When Tom Fentriss pulled out, you're the one who wanted his grass. You've been trying to kill me to get it, and to cover yourself by making it look like a water steal by the Keegans. Crowe, it won't work."

"No? I've put in a lot of time on this. Planting talk, through Fitch, about the Keegans. Taking a mortgage I knew they couldn't pay off, so I can foreclose on their grass any time. Letting you run up a big bill at my store so I'd have first claim on your property after getting rid of you. You're right, Tasker; these two pieces of grass do belong together. And there'll be an end of the nonsense you've been spouting about bringing beef in to ruin my hay business. It'll work! Get up that bank; the water's about due."

Will heard it—a distant mutter of sound increasing in volume. And he guessed what Crowe had in mind. He went slowly up the bank, Liz still beside him. The storekeeper chuckled at his elbow.

"You didn't even get your gates set," Crowe said. "It'll pour on down the ditch. A pair of bullets, and in you two go. Then Pete after you. I was willing to pay high to get rid of you so I could grab this grass, Tasker. With Fitch out of the way and no bill due from him, it looks like I'm coming by it cheap."

Will lunged sideways, taking the blast of his gun from close up, hitting the man with his shoulder and driving him back. Pain from Crowe's bullet burned his. right side, but it didn't seem to hamper him.

Crowe fired again, a narrow miss, and then Tasker's hands were on him. He grappled hastily for the gun, twisting it. Crowe tried to level his weapon again, but in his haste pulled trigger once more while it was still turned against his own body. The storekeeper spilled hard and started to roll. Will grabbed hastily for him. Crowe slid away from his clutching fingers, into the ditch, was caught by the rushing water and whirled under. Will lifted the lantern high, but there was only the dark, surging flood to be seen.

"Pete's all right. He's getting up," Liz Keegan said unevenly. "I should have guessed he'd be doing some looking for the water thief on his own. Will, I couldn't stay away, tonight. I wanted to see you again, and tell how ashamed I was of the way I acted this afternoon."

"I only wanted to find the calibre of your father's rifle, girl," Tasker said. "Didn't seem to me it was a .45-90. Maybe this could have been avoided if I'd known then that Pete hadn't shot at me. But luck—or something—was with us all the way. Crowe's own gun finished him, and my hide was hardly scorched by his bullet. It's a kind of luck we've got to keep on our side. I can borrow enough on my grass to cover those mortgage payments, I think. And then our two places together in one ranch, eh?"

"I—I think I'll like that," she agreed.

"There's something else," he hurried on recklessly. "I don't think these two ranches are all that belong together—"

"Will, you've only known me a day!" Liz protested, hands out as he moved toward her. "I've got a bad temper; I've slapped you."

Then she couldn't talk any more for a minute, and when she could she didn't seem to want to talk—or to slap him, either. Will grinned, holding her close. Maybe he had known Liz only a day, but he had wasted three good months before meeting her. He had a lot of time to make up, and he meant to start right now.

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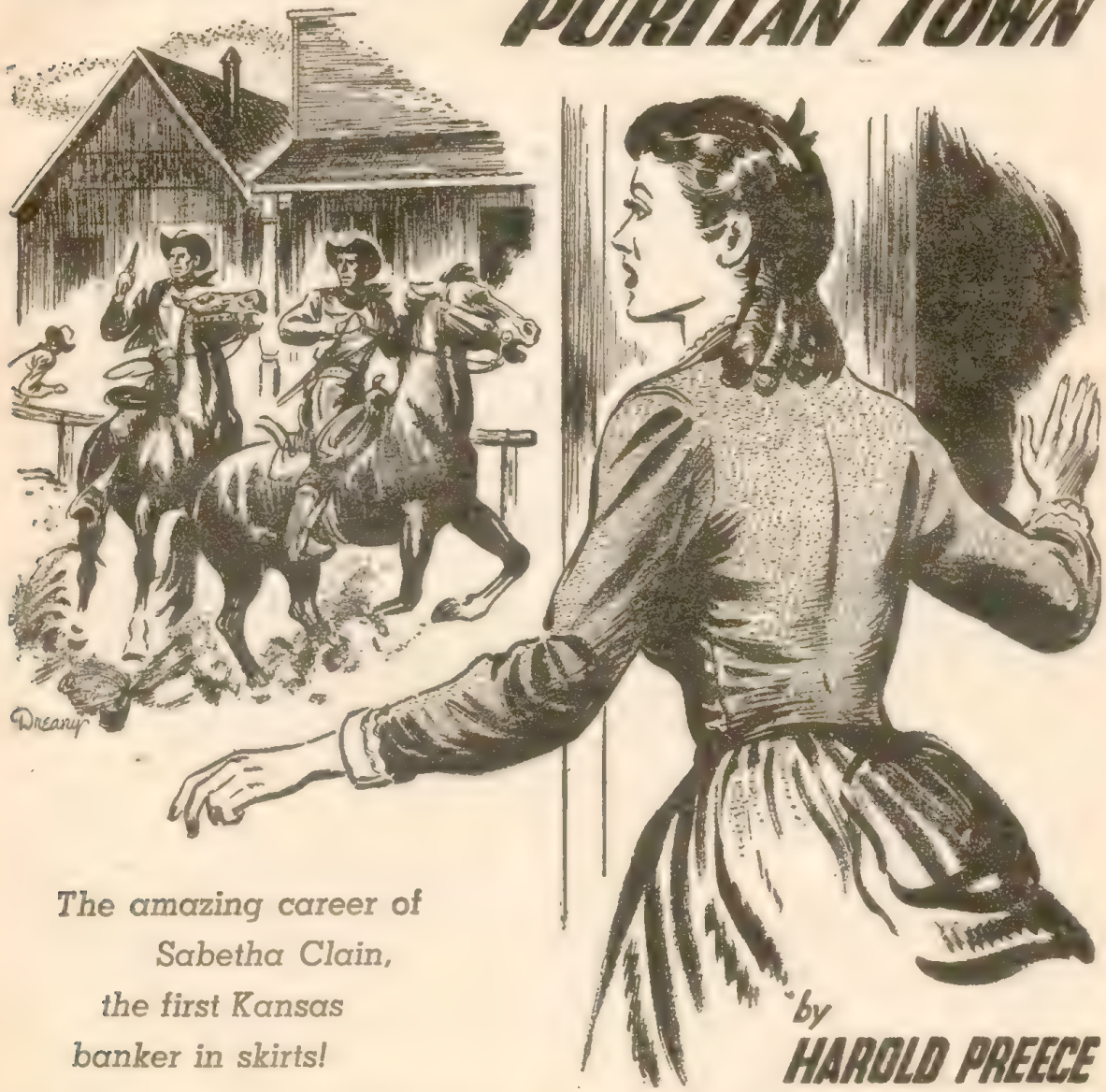
NEXT ISSUE

LOVE AND THE CACTUS KID

A Novelet of Western Hearts by LOUIS L'AMOUR

Maverick Gal of PURITAN TOWN



The amazing career of Sabetha Clain, the first Kansas banker in skirts!

by HAROLD PREECE

THE big rancher nodded curtly to the grayhaired man mending a bridle there in the harness store. Then he fumbled his roll of bills and gazed skeptically at the little girl sitting behind the barred window at the back. FIRST STATE BANK OF GORMAN, KANSAS, read the neat placard tacked under the window.

The little girl stared at the cowman in a solemn, businesslike way. The rancher laid down the bills. "Two per cent interest on everything you salt down here?" he asked. "That right, Sabetha?"

"That's right, Jeff," the little girl answered briskly. "And safer here than in Martha's cookie crock." Her lithe

hands counted the bills. They reckoned up to five hundred and thirty dollars. A few scratches of the pen, and the rancher was fingering gingerly the pass book she gave him.

"Don't hardly trust this here way of plantin' cash like corn and makin' it sprout more cash," he drawled. "Reckon your dad's good for it?"

The little girl frowned. "Sabetha Clain's good for it," she answered sharply.

She bent her dark head over her big, black ledger as the cowman walked out. Sabetha Clain knew that he was not the only settler in Western Kansas who was wondering and talking about her this April of 1868.

At fifteen, she was not only the youngest banker the West had ever seen. She was also its first banker in skirts.

The good folk around Gorman had thought it a childish prank when they read her ad, asking for interest-bearing deposits in the county paper. Not that everybody didn't consider Sabetha an uncommon bright girl, and an uncommon beautiful one too. But banking was a man's business, and ladies looked forward only to the business of birthing babies.

Elders Scold Girl's Dad

The stern New England settlers who ran the community sent a delegation to scold her father.

"Your child's head will be turned if you indulge her in such frivolity," glumly said the church elder, who led the committee. "Sabetha should be learning to cook and sew. My wife will take her on as our hired girl, so she can grow up to be a good woman for a good man."

Sabetha Clain's father looked them straight in the eye. He, too, was of Pilgrim stock and his face set hard like Plymouth Rock when he was mad.

"This is a new country," he said, "where a woman can be something new. Now, good day. I've got to finish splicing this harness for those Texas cowmen."

Mention of the Texans sent the delegation flying. The Kansas settlers were mostly transplanted New Englanders. They had no love for the gun-packing Texans.

It was the Texans, and other Westerners with the blood of the South, who swelled the deposits entrusted to the little girl banker.

"How much capital you startin' with, honey?" asked a Texas cattle buyer who came in to cash a check, a week after Sabetha had opened for business.

"Six hundred dollars, Buck," Sabetha answered. "Six hundred I put together from helping Dad around the shop and Ma around the house."

The Texan reached through the bars and chucked her under the chin. "Pardner," he laughed. "I always liked anybody who'd risk a high play on a low stake. Here's my stake. Put it away for me."

He counted out eight one-thousand dollar bills.

Sabetha's brain worked hard to keep her eyes from bulging. It was her first big account. She knew there wasn't a bank from Dodge City to Denver that wouldn't welcome Buck Sanders' business.

Not long afterward, a dozen men stalked through the door of the harness shop. Their lean faces bristled with whiskers and their belts bristled with guns. Instinctively, her fingers stole down and twined around the pearl-handled Colt in her cash box.

Then she saw the friendly smile, all but hidden out by the matted beard, on the face of the leader.

"Just sold the steers we drove up from Texas," he was explaining. "Just paid off my boys here." He paused a moment and chuckled. "Been tellin' them they need a little woman to hold on to their cash. Reckon you'll have to be that little woman till they find their own."

He handed her an oat bag filled with heavy coins.

"It'll be here for 'em with a little more besides," promised Sabetha, putting the money into the cash box.

Then the hard-eyed dance hall girls began bringing her the cash they clipped from cowpokes and buffalo hunters. It was Sabetha's first contact with "the bad girls," spilling out over Kansas from every part of America. The sirens, painted up like Comanches on the warpath, outnumbered "the nice girls" and the New England matrons many times

over. It worried Sabetha's father that these women should hold such fascination for his smart daughter.

He noticed how closely Sabetha studied their finery when they came in to deposit money. He saw how her eyes took in their hair-dos. Honest Harness-maker Clain was for the abolition of the chains that had bound women as he'd been for abolishing those that bound black men. But he believed that a woman ought to stay good once she had been unbound.

He said an earnest Puritan prayer when, at the end of her first year's business, Sabetha had the finest wardrobe in the West sent her from Denver. His eyes admired the beautiful young girl in the handsome clothes. His heart told him that she was changing in a manner that he had never expected nor could ever accept.

"Heathen finery is a loose woman's trademark." So he remembered his grim mother saying when she took time off from singing her grim hymns.

Sabetha Is Proud of Clothes

Actually, Sabetha, in that lean age, was dressed no better or no worse than any trim business girl of today. When her father rebuked her about her clothes, she snapped back:

"I earned 'em! I'll wear 'em."

That silenced the old man. In a year's time, a girl just turning sixteen had balanced her books with a net profit of seven thousand dollars.

Newspapers throughout the West were hailing her as a young capitalist. She had invested shrewdly the money handed her through the little iron cage. She had made crop loans to homesteaders. She had let it out to responsible ranchers anxious to improve their herds with blooded stock. Maybe, she charged higher interest rates than usual. But the risks were greater than usual out there, where a bunch of steers, pledged as collateral, might be driven off the next day by rustlers.

Even the Puritans began banking with her after she met punctually the two per cent interest payments due depositors. One Sunday, the church elder preached that "the love of money is the root of all evil." Bright and early, Monday morning, he brought in a bag of gold dollars that would have choked a wagon ox.

He glared at her clothes and shook a stern finger. "They who deck themselves like lilies shall be uprooted and cast away like thistles," he rumbled. Then with his root of evil safely planted in Sabetha's bank, he went out to attach a herd of steers whose owner owed money at his store.

Four years after the start of her venture, Sabetha Clain was worth a cool fifty thousand. That was a lot of money for any girl of nineteen anywhere in America. Men—many men—shined up to her. But she sent them all away, thinking they wanted only her money.

The Sunday meeting of the Puritans saw less and less of her. But the dance hall girls saw her often—too often for her dad's peace of mind.

By now, she'd moved her bank from the harness shop to larger quarters in a grocery store. But taking no risks with a score of outlaw gangs ravaging Kansas, she still kept a part of her capital hidden away in a rain barrel outside the harness place.

A second-rate outlaw did hold her up for two thousand dollars: all the money she had in the cash box. That was a trifling loss. She had twenty thousand cached away beneath an old saddle blanket tacked on the wall.

Then she looked up from her ledger, one day, to find herself facing two big Colts aimed her way by two determined-looking men. She recognized the men from reward posters she'd seen tacked up in the town post office. They were two notorious gents from across the border in Missouri. They were the James Boys —Jesse and Frank.

But she gave no sign that she knew them. "Howdy, fellows," she greeted the pair. "Like to help you, but I reckon you got here a little too late. Heard the James Boys were heading this way, so I sent my cash on to St. Joe."

She saw Jesse James wince at this, and she knew that she'd hit him hard. For St. Joseph, Missouri, was his main hangout.

"Let's bang her ears off with these," the outlaw growled to his brothers.

"Make good fans for our ponies."

Sabetha and Frank James joined in the laughter. The girl knew that Jesse was a hard man. She knew, also, that he had never laid a rough hand on a woman.

"Drill a pretty girl like this one?" Frank James chuckled. "Why it's worth losin' a million bank hauls just to look at her."

Outlaws Dodge Posse

He swept off his sombrero and bowed low. "Good day, ma'am," he said. The James Boys ran out the door and jumped on their ponies as a hard-riding, hard-shooting posse entered the city limits.

Sabetha was glad she'd saved her roll, and that the James Boys had outridden the posse. But for months, she dreamed of the courtly bandit, Frank James. If she could meet a man like that.... Then she made herself stop thinking about him. She knew that the gallant outlaw was eternally faithful to the jealous Missouri girl he'd courted and married.

"If a girl wants a good husband," Sabetha laughed, "let her marry a bandit. He's always home by his fireside—except when he's out on business. And what business!"

Nine more years passed. At the end of that time, Sabetha Clain, now twenty-eight was fabulously wealthy. Besides the bank, she owned fertile farms and big ranches with fine herds. But her heart was as big as her roll. Every wandering saddle tramp, needing a ten-buck grubstake to move further on, hit up Sabetha Clain. Every nester family, short on cash till crop time, could go to Sabetha and have her stand good for their grocery bill. She never foreclosed on a note until she decided that a man was an out-and-out deadbeat. Then she was merciless.

She became the unofficial protector of all the dance hall girls in Western Kansas. She bailed them out when they got in trouble, and used her influence to get them freed. If one of them decided to "go straight" and "go home," it was Sabetha who shelled out train fare.

But it was Sabetha Clain, maverick from the Puritan fold, who gave Kansas some of its first public schools. "Everybody out here's trying to do something for himself," she said. "Nobody's trying to do anything for the children."

Sabetha hired carpenters from St. Joseph and St. Louis. She had them build ten schoolhouses and footed every cent of the cost. She sent back East for a hundred and fifty teachers. She paid their fare out and met their salaries till the communities took over.

The Puritans respected books as they respected banknotes. They had hopes of reclaiming her when she provided schools for the prairie youngsters. Then she took her next step, and their tongues started blistering her like an inferno.

She opened a saloon.

It was a little place, costing only ten thousand, called the "Idle Hour." Soon, it became the most popular dram palace in town.

The Puritans met to denounce her and to erase her name from the church roll. She answered them defiantly.

At thirty, the handsome woman with the face and build of an empress was still rich and still unmarried. Deep down in a corner of her heart stirred the memory of Frank James. Unconsciously, she judged every man by him. Consciously, she found them all lacking in the qualities of that bandit, now nearing the end of his lawless trail.

A New York drummer stopped by her place one day. When he opened his sample case, she ordered everything he had in stock: lavish silk and satin gowns, ravishing negligees, imported ivory fans, and other garments that nice girls didn't talk about.

"When you deliver them," she said, "I'm going to throw you more business. We're going to have a fashion show, the very first one in Kansas. And this little girl is going to be the model."

She Gives Style Show

Even the Puritan women turned out in scared fascination for that one-woman show put on by Sabetha Clain at the Gorman Opera House.

The ladies stared when she walked on the stage dressed in the finest gown ever seen West of St. Joseph.

"You girls," she declaimed, "are always mouth shooting about the competition of the dance hall crowd. Well, maybe, those girls miss a lot on being what

they ought to be.

"But they've got something, you haven't got. They know something you don't know."

She paused for a minute to let it sink in. Then she leaned over and said in a stage whisper:

"They know how to make themselves attractive and charming to men."

The men howled and applauded. The dance hall girls on the left hand side of the house snickered. The Puritan ladies gasped, and one of them slapped her husband square in the mouth. Then came the climax of the show.

Time after time, Sabetha Clain put on gown after gown, accessory after accessory, stripping down to her underthings each time. As she exhibited the clothes, the volunteer model kept up a running comment to her Puritan sisters.

"You wrap yourselves up in a dozen heavy petticoats." Why don't you wear one pretty piece like this?" jerking a creation of a famous New York designer over her head. "You hide your faces with those idiotic shapeless bonnets. Why don't you wear a hat like this one?" As she spoke, she was fitting a chic headpiece over her hair.

Tar-and-Feather Party

Next morning, Sabetha was richer by three hundred dollars the drummer gratefully gave her for demonstrating his wares. Next morning, also, the women of Gorman were organizing a tar-and-feather party to run her out of town. Egging on the mob was Martha Martin, the wife of her first depositor.

Then the henpecked husbands of the Puritan belles turned and asserted themselves. "It was Sabetha Clain who staked us during that drouth when our cattle were dying," Jeff Martin thundered at his mate. "Shut up, woman, before I shut you up!"

"I ain't fergittin' how Sabetha Clain paid the doctor bill when our oldest boy was laid up from snake bite," a gaunt nester snapped at his wife. "No matter what she's done, she'd still be the finest woman in Kansas."

"Why doesn't she marry like an honest woman?" growled the elder's wife.

And getting married was exactly what Sabetha Clain was figuring on doing.

She looked in her mirror, touching with her hands the first crow's feet appearing under her eyes. "I don't want to pass out an old maid," she muttered. "I'm a woman. I want love—and I want to give love."

Something made her feel chill in her heart. Maybe, it was foreknowledge that the Old West was passing with the last thinning buffalo herds, with the last stagecoach drivers staring hard and resignedly at the first of the iron horses thundering down the newly-laid tracks. Maybe, it was the remembered goodbys she had said to the last Indian bands, moving farther west into history—and into nothingness.

Maybe, it was the knowledge that the Puritans were winning—as the Puritans always win.

Whatever it was, she knew that she needed a man and that she could never have the kind of a man her arms ached for. Frank James, the bandit prince, the

[*Turn page*]

courtliest and deadliest robber who'd ever sat a saddle, was now tamely selling shoes, after the murder of his brother, Jesse, by Bob Ford.

Her ideal man had vanished, like the wild pigeon and the buffalo, in an age that was vanishing.

She began sifting out the men of her acquaintance, humbling herself because she would have never considered any of them before the iron rails and the barbed wire snaked their way across Kansas.

Calmly, as if she were deciding on the merits of a loan, she settled on a railroad section hand named Herbert Warrenton.

Good Mr. Warrenton had never sat a saddle nor blazed a Colt. He had confined his sinning to two glasses of beer in her saloon. He had gruffly refused all invitations to a friendly hand at faro.

When she married Herbert Warrenton, she closed her saloon and moved with him to a homestead near Hyland, Kansas. She'd been a successful banker and a successful saloonkeeper. Those successes were nothing. Above all, she wanted to be a successful wife.

Her Husband Leaves

She bared her neck to the Puritan yoke. She cooked Herbert's meals and patched his jumpers. She neglected her own financial interests, and they began declining.

Land hogs grabbed her farms and ranches. Creditors failed to pay their notes, knowing she would never be by to collect. Finally, the state of Kansas closed out the bank, in which she still maintained an interest, as "insolvent." Her last funds went to pay off depositors and stockholders.

Then Herbert Warrenton began finding fault with her. He took her to none of the community box suppers and square dances because he feared her lingering beauty that might attract other men. He scowled when she dressed herself up in her threadbare finery on lonesome evenings. His jaw set hard when he began finding empty bottles in their bedroom.

He said nothing. But one silent, moody night before the fireplace, he put on his hat and walked out the door. She never saw him again.

For months she mourned him as autumn waned over the Kansas prairies with never a scarlet leaf being blown across her homestead to commemorate the scarlet West that had been.

On a bitter night in 1887, the biggest blizzard in the state's history hit Kansas. The wind was howling a requiem for the Old West, that night, when a chicken in the coop collided against a burning lantern that Sabetha had forgot to put out. The fire spread to the barn. Awakening in bed, Sabetha heard the crackling flames. She jumped up, wrapped a blanket around her body, and ran to the barn to rescue her saddle horse.

She hadn't gone ten feet before she stumbled in a huge snowdrift. The drowsy coolness felt good to her—.

After the blizzard was over, a party of cowboys found her dead in the drift.

When they searched her cabin, they found on the mantel of the fireplace forty one-dollar bills.

It wasn't enough to bury her when they brought her back to Gorman. Then a townsman named John Horton, whom she had once befriended, stepped forward.

"She lived rich and she can't die mean," John Horton told the local undertaker. "Give her the finest burial ever seen in Gorman, and send the bill to me."

Years after Sabetha Clain was laid away, a handsome monument was erected over her grave. The inscription read:

"The state's first woman banker. She was fair and honest with everybody but herself. She tried to build happiness on a cheap foundation."

It was a shabby Puritan epitaph for a gallant girl of a flaming age.

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Next Issue

MOLLIE FEATHERLEGS OF THE VIGILANTES

Another Fascinating True Story of a Woman of the West by HAROLD PREECE

Gunsmoke Fiesta

by Walt Sheldon

Yolanda and the young lieutenant raced for the strewn boulders

FOR the first time Yolanda O'Hara felt conscious of her fringed buckskin trousers and rough wool shirt. They were, of course, quite the thing for this sage-dotted highland that sloped like a Spanish skirt from the bodice of the Sangre de Cristos. They were perfectly suited to the hard rutted trail that led past the rock cluster called Goliath's Jewels. Yolanda's father and all the other mountain men had worn such clothes for years.

But the Lieutenant's very young eyes flickered over these duds and his words were even more maddening. "This is no place for a little girl to be out riding all alone," he said. "You ought to stay back in the town."

Little girl! Yolanda glared at him. She was nineteen, and by her powder, he

Yolanda Could Read Indian Sign—and a Man's Heart!

wasn't much more than that! If he thought she couldn't take care of herself she'd offer to demonstrate at fifty yards with rifles— Or at no yards with Green River knives! She had met him so suddenly coming around the bend that she had almost put a sixteen-to-the-pound ball in him.

Then she had recognized the blue uniform as the one that had paraded in the plaza when the *Americanos* moved into Tesqua to protect the town from Apache raids. That was their official reason—but Yolanda suspected that maybe they were there to put down any sudden insurrections. Some of the new Mexicans hadn't been too happy with the way the Blueback Neds were running the country since they took it over from Mexico a few years ago.

Yolanda fixed this very young lieutenant with her gray eyes and said, "I'm safer from Apaches out here nor *you* are!"

It was probably true. The Lieutenant —Peter Wade was his name, she recalled now—had broad shoulders and his neck muscles rippled nicely under skin that was slightly red from the sun. Altogether he was probably a man to meet other men on more than even terms. But Yolanda knew what happened to those who didn't understand the Apaches. She had seen skull bones laid bare. She had seen blood-stained lockram and calico.

Peter Wade bowed gravely in the saddle and said, "Nevertheless, ma'am, I'll be obliged to escort you back."

Yolanda said, "I'm going to the Pueblo. I need new moccasins and I mean to have them."

"Ma'am," smiled Wade, "you're as headstrong as a New York actress." For a moment there seemed to be a dreamy recollective look in his eye. "I've just been to the Pueblo," he said, "trying to get their help against the Apaches. They're in an ugly mood. Someone's been stirring them up."

"I'm going to the Pueblo," said Yolanda again.

IN HER possible sack was a bottle of her father's choicest *agua ardiente*, which she meant to trade for the moccasins. Old Lodgepole O'Hara drank too much of the stuff, anyway. Fact was he had never really done too well as a trader—he looked longingly at the blue mountains too often—but he had settled down after Yolanda's mother died so that the child could be brought up more or less, bless him.

Yolanda still liked best the things she had learned from the old trapper. Her lessons in being a lady from the Doña Concepcion Martinez were much harder to take—except, maybe, the lessons on dressing. She'd never forget the time Doña Concepcion had allowed her to try on a *baile* costume—a full hooped skirt with a red linen bodice and a black lace *rebosa*.

The Doña had remarked then—a mite enviously, perhaps—that Yolanda's startlingly white skin, raven hair and bright gray eyes would wreak havoc at the Governor's mansion in Santa Fe. Or even at the San Geronimo Fiesta *baile* with Greg Tolliver, who was considered by some the most promising young lawyer in the territory. Greg had been known to say some nice things about Yolanda.

Maybe, Yolanda thought now, it would be best for her to be ladylike with this Blueback whippersnapper. He was from the East. He seemed to attach some importance to fine and fancy things.

"I will thank you, sir," said Yolanda stiffly—and not quite naturally—"to remove your presence from my intended passage so that I may proceed to my intended destination."

The Lieutenant lifted his head to laugh.

He never got around to it. At that moment there was a sudden mass whooping—and the rise ahead was abruptly black with mounted figures—red scraps of cloth tied about black, banged hair—floppy *calzoncillos* about bowed legs—loin cloths on some. Flat faces with slitted eyes under ridged sloping brows—Apaches. An arrow lobbed from the rise, whirring as it came, spiraling round and round in its flight.

"Run!" cried Peter Wade. His yellow glove pointed toward the Pueblo.

"No, no—not that way!" Yolanda's horse was prancing and she was holding him with a strong wrist with a few

silent curses going through her head. "In the rocks! I know the way!"

He looked at her curiously for an instant and several more arrows whistled by them. He scowled then, heeled his mount around and said, "All right—come *on*!"

THEY raced for the strewn boulders. Hoofs drummed and the thin wind passed by. Yolanda's black hair streamed away, tugging at her scalp. She led the lieutenant into a narrow crack which was an inverted V between two looming red boulders—big as houses.

Wade wanted to stop. He itched about in the saddle, drew his dragoon pistol and said, "Let me give those yellow-skinned devils—"

"No time!" she said quickly. "If we hurry we can circle them and get back to town before they see us!"

"All right, all right." He was scowling. It might even have been called a pout.

Yolanda knew these rocks. As a tomboy child she had slain uncounted imaginary silver bears, catamounts and curly wolves within their twisting maze-like passageways. She led the Lieutenant on.

They broke from the rocks nearly a mile to the south. They faced about two hundred yards of sloping meadow and after that the road into town. The Apaches were just on the point of streaming into the V-shaped notch—and they spotted the fugitives. They yipped and came after them.

Yolanda and Peter Wade rode like the messengers of Satan until the yellow patches of clustered 'dobe and the whisks of pale green aspen were well in sight. They were a bare hundred yards from the town of Tesqua before the yipping ceased and they dared to look back. The Apaches were riding off—not hurriedly, however, but with an air that said they might be back sometime.

They walked the lathered horses. Yolanda smiled and turned to look at the Lieutenant. If anything his scowl was deeper than before. He kept his eyes straight ahead and there seemed to be two small, pink spots on his cheeks. It occurred to Yolanda that even the scowl on his face was a pleasant one. There was more kindness in it than—well, for instance—Greg Tolliver. Of course, the Lieutenant was mighty angry about something.

"We fooled them, didn't we?" she asked gently.

He looked at her and the two pink spots deepened. He made a noise that sounded like clearing his throat. "Well," he growled, "*you* did, anyway."

AS THE crow flies it wasn't very far from Lodgepole O'Hara's general merchandise store on the plaza to the soldier's camp just north of the plaza. Yolanda had occasion to find out by personally traveling the route a number of times in the next few days. She found excuses which convinced her but not old Lodgepole.

She would gather furs and beadwork together and say to her father, "You know these soldiers will buy things. But I'm going to catch them before they get to the plaza and spend all their money on *agua ardiente*."

"*Wugh!*" old Lodgepole would say. It was his favorite sound. He used it to mean yes, no, maybe and all the fine shades of meaning in-between. Once a pilgrim had asked him where he'd got the noise and he grunted that he had "picked it up off'n a dead Injun."

He had given Yolanda her gray eyes and his curly beard and shoulder-long locks had once been as black as her tresses. They had gray streaks now. His face might have been a relief map of the Rockies he had trodden from Taos to Digger country. He moved always very slowly—frowning and thinking over carefully every little move, even the putting of his elbow from here to over there on a table.

"Well—it's true, isn't it?" Yolanda challenged him. She spread her moccasined feet and put her hands on her hips.

"Jist see you ack like a lady with them Bluebacks," grunted Lodgepole. "Just see you remember all that yuh learnt from the Doña."

"I don't want to be a lady!" she snorted. "Not that fancy kind."

"*Wugh!*" said Lodgepole. "Yore Maw was one."

She glared back for awhile but

couldn't think of anything to say to that, so she gathered up her possibles and stalked out. She thought—but couldn't be sure—that she heard Lodgepole chuckle as she went through the door.

This routine, with variations, went on for several days. She did, in fact, sell a very nice quantity of merchandise to various soldiers of the small detachment which was quartered in the 'dobe compound that proudly and quixotically bore the name of Fort Doniphan. There were two companies—about sixty men altogether. Yolanda got to see fifty-nine of them anyway.

But no matter how much she drifted toward the door of the office and quarters belonging to Lieutenant Peter Wade she never seemed to catch sight of him. Once she swore she caught him looking from the window, pulling his head back quick when he saw her.

The inevitable waited until the fifth day before it decided to happen. She met Greg Tolliver as she was riding out toward the encampment.

"Yolanda! *Com' está!*" boomed Tolliver, swerving his big black horse toward hers. He had been riding in the opposite direction, probably on his way back from the Doña Concepcion's hacienda. He handled her legal affairs.

"Oh, hello, Greg," she said without much enthusiasm.

"I'd shore admire *es*-cortin' yuh wherever yuh're goin'!" said Greg. All Tesqua might have heard it without much trouble. He lifted a huge black felt from his head and bowed.

Some might have said that Greg Tolliver was a good deal handsomer than Lieutenant Wade. He was darker and infinitely more mature in appearance—although probably not much older. He sported a fine glossy mustache which swept upward at the ends.

The Tollivers had made considerable running wagon trains from Santa Fe to Independence, Missouri, and back and they'd set their son to a fancy Eastern school. Greg knew better than to use its fancy Eastern ways in this country.

He spoke Spanish among those who did and mixed up his tenses in English with the best of them. Like the others of Anglo stock who had been here before Kearney came he considered himself a New Mexican, not an *Americano*. A New Mexican fust, last and fer a long time. It was almost—although not quite—as bad as being a Texan.

"I'm going to the fort, Greg," Yolanda said. "Trading, that's all. You needn't come—"

"Trading?" Tolliver had a way of lifting one full smudged eyebrow and keeping the other still. It devastated juries.

"Trading, Greg Tolliver," said Yolanda sharply. "And I'm perfectly capable of doing it all by myself."

Tolliver laughed, throwing his mellow tones to the cottonwood branches which curved over the road. "Well jest look out you don't git stung in the wrong place. In the heart, maybe. I hear some o' these fancy officers got some mighty fancy ladies back East."

"You go dip your head in a sack of *pinole!*" snapped Yolanda.

Tolliver laughed again. He leaned forward, palm on the saddle horn and said, "Jest in case yore fancy *loo*-tenant don't ask yuh to the San Geronimo *baile* I'd be mighty proud tuh take yuh."

"Mr. Tolliver," said Yolanda coldly, "I wouldn't go with you to a Digger Indian's reunion." With that she heeled her mare and swept past him, her tiny firm chin high in the air. She rode at a stiff pace until the sound of his laughter was out of her ears.

THAT day, for the first time, she found a chance to speak to Peter Wade again. She was bargaining with a barrel-chested Irish sergeant about a necklace of Manzano tortoise when he walked up, frowning earnestly, gave her an absent-minded nod of recognition and immediately began muttering to the Sergeant about food for the men. Seemed the barreled salt pork they had brought was running low.

Yolanda promptly thought of old Lodgepole's store of *agua ardiente*. And that immediately reminded her of Juan Garcia, the whiskey maker.

"Lieutenant," she said, "I know where there's plenty of grain—and I don't think you'll have much trouble buying it. All you have to do is remind Garcia that he's making *agua ardiente* without a government permit."

After she gave him the details he thanked her profusely of course— But in a terribly polite formal way. He seemed embarrassed and uncomfortable in her presence. He seemed not to know quite what to say next. It was very strange behavior for a dashing young Lieutenant of Dragoons, who had undoubtedly had his share of experience with some of the more glamorous examples of the fairer sex. New York actresses and things, perhaps—

Two days later Yolanda happened to be in the camp when the Navajo messenger arrived from beyond Abiquiu. No one could speak his language. Yolanda offered her services.

After the parley she found herself, for the first time, in the Lieutenant's office. The Sergeant had stepped out to see the messenger off—and she realized with a sudden little tug of alarm that she was alone with Peter Wade.

He got up from his desk, crossed the room and stood in front of her. He hooked his thumbs into his tunic belt. "Well," he said, looking down at her, "you're quite a talented young lady, aren't you?"

She shrugged. "I've traded Navajo for some time. Actually I speak it very badly."

"I didn't mean exactly that, Miss O'Hara," Wade said. His hesitating tight-in-the-throat tones were a relief from Tolliver's booming voice, she reflected. He shuffled his feet and moved his hands about a bit, not knowing quite where to put them. He finally rested them on his belt again.

"I mean sort of everything you do," he said. "Ride like an Indian. Outsmart Apaches. Find food when the whole darned country seems determined we shan't have it. You're sure—well, sort of different from any young ladies I ever knew."

Yolanda dipped her head, but kept her eyes on him. "Have you known many young ladies? I mean, *many*?"

"Hm?" Wade stared at her for a moment, and then his cheeks became pink. "Well, yes—I mean no. I mean as many as anybody, I guess."

Yolanda took a deep breath and then made the plunge. "I don't think I'm really so different from the other young ladies you've known, Lieutenant. I can sew and play the piano and handle a fan. And, as you'll see at the San Geronimo *baile*—I can dance too."

She waited, then. He stared at her, shuffled his feet a bit more, said, "Uh—" and then took his hands from his belt again.

"Would you like to take me to San Geronimo?" said Yolanda finally, blinking rapidly and in the helpless feminine way that Doña Concepcion had taught her.

"Miss O'Hara!" said the Lieutenant, breaking into a sudden grin. "*Yolanda!* I sure would! By Jove, I would! I was just—well, wondering how to ask you. I mean, I thought—you being so smart with Indians and everything—I mean —well, anyway, I should be delighted. I mean—"

All this time he had been swaying closer to her and she to him. His cheeks were a deep pink. His russet eyebrows were all twisted up with each other. She hadn't planned on *this* happening—not so quickly, anyway—but since it was here, since it was filling the moment and crackling like wildfire between them—

PETER WADE swept her into his arms and she melted against him. His lips came down, warm, parted slightly and met hers. She felt the fire of them, and she gave them the fire of her own. Her eyelids fell and stars and rockets and swirling many-colored scarves made a kaleidoscope in her brain. It almost seemed that she could hear the distant music of a *heaca* guitar.

"Oh, Peter—Peter, d a r l i n g!" she heard herself whisper.

"Yolanda—Yolanda, my love!" he breathed.

She placed her fingers on the back of his neck and held them there lightly. She looked up into his fresh blue eyes. He was searching her face. She searched back.

"Peter—there's no one else, is there? If there is you must tell me—I must know that—"

"Of course there isn't," he answered quickly. She wondered if it had come too quickly. He shook his head. "There never has been. You're the first, my darling. You're—"

There came a rap on the door and they broke quickly.

The barrel-chested Sergeant came in with some papers. He glanced quickly about him, then pretended he hadn't noticed a thing and Wade made growling noises in his throat and stepped back to the desk.

"The orders for that grain from Garcia, Lieutenant," the Sergeant said in a half-apologetic voice. "He's yellin' for 'em and—"

"It's all right, Riordan. It's quite all right," Wade said sententiously. He sat down to sign the papers.

Yolanda turned her back and made idle steps across the room in the other direction. She was a little disappointed to find that she didn't feel in the least embarrassed. A lady ought to, she was sure. Her steps brought her to the open door that led to the Lieutenant's small living quarters.

She gazed absently at the unmade cot in there, the water pitcher and the ammunition box that served as table and dresser. She was about to turn her head away when the picture on the box caught her eyes. She dipped her head and looked more closely. It was a miniature, painted in full color, mounted in a scalloped and gilded frame. Across the bottom of it, on a tiny scroll, were lettered the words—

Faithfully Forever to My Darling Soldier,

Laura DuVray.

Comets and then cold chills passed through Yolanda. Her skin became hot and dry. She looked away quickly. She turned slowly just as the barrel-chested Sergeant was leaving and Wade was rising from his desk again.

He crossed the room toward her, eager, smiling, his face the model for a hundred sunrises.

"Lieutenant, please don't t r o u b l e yourself to escort me to the door," said Yolanda coldly. "I shall be quite able to depart without assistance."

"What?" said Wade, stopping on one foot, raising his brows.

"I trust I spoke clearly and in acceptable English," said Yolanda. The Doña Concepcion would have been proud of that one.

"*Yolanda!*" Wade said.

She moved quickly to the door, regretting that she wore buckskins instead of a flowing skirt, which would have helped her to glide majestically. At the door she turned for a moment. Wade was still standing there, gaping at her curiously.

"When you return from this outpost," said Yolanda icily, "you can tell your New York actress or whoever she is how gaily you played with the heart of an innocent half-savage!"

"Yolanda, what are you talking about?" Wade took a step toward her.

She slipped out of the door and slammed it behind her.

Yolanda made no more trips to the encampment. Old Lodgepole puffed on his clay dudeen every once in a while and said between puffs, "Wugh. How 'bout that fancy lootenant o' yourn?"

But she refused to answer him. She refused too to be affected by his deep frown when Greg Tolliver began to drop into the store every day again. Deliberately she spent long minutes waiting on Tolliver, deliberately she deepened and stretched their conversations. It was somehow understood, without so many words, that Tolliver was to be her escort by the time San Geronimo rolled around.

San Geronimo had a very special meaning to Yolanda. It wasn't a fiesta to her at all—it was to be the setting for her revenge.

At last it was the day of the *baile*. As she did every year the Doña Concepcion turned over her *sala* to the revelers and long before the evening began the music had started. The players simply arrived early with *heaca, bandolin, tombe* and violin, accepted the jug the Doña ordered placed beside them and began to play.

"That we practise," they explained with elaborate shrugs.

The Doña welcomed the first guests at about eight o'clock. Presently nearly all of Tesqua was milling about in the huge ball room, flushed and smiling in the orange glow of the *luminares*, swaying to the intricate rhythms of the *fandango* and the *cuña*.

YOLANDA came late. She entered upon the arm of Gregory Tolliver, who was grinning happily and waving to his friends in both English and Spanish—a husky sweep of his arm for the former and a graceful curving gesture for the latter. He seemed impervious to the stares that were turned Yolanda's way.

For Yolanda wore no *baile* costume. About her head and shoulders was the shawl of a Pueblo woman and her hair was cut in straight bangs and twisted with red flannel to a knot in the back, Navajo style. Her tunic and long straight trousers were Apache garb. About her waist was a tight belt festooned with silver *conchas*. Her feet twinkled along in soft deerskin mocassins.

She held her head high. She kept her eyes straight ahead and she soared like an eagle past all the sudden whispers and scandalized looks. She lifted her head even higher as she passed Lieutenant Peter Wade, who was doing fairly well for himself at the punch bowl.

The music started again suddenly—a little sooner than it should have—and it was painfully clear why. Yolanda didn't care. She whirled and swept into the dance with Tolliver. He smirked down at her happily, eagerly.

She all but closed her eyes and lost herself to the furious yet hesitating rhythm. She swirled over the floor, up and around and back and forth—a chip upon the rapids, the wild rapids, the raw country. Let Wade see her now—let Wade see what a savage she could be!

It didn't surprise her at all when, after several dances, Tolliver steered her out upon the patio. His dark eyes were hungry upon her face and his heavy breath wasn't entirely from the exhaustion of dancing. Yolanda met his look squarely, and smiled. *Wild girl—savage, was she?* She laughed at nothing in particular and grasped Tolliver's arm a little more tightly.

They stood with their elbows on the adobe wall and looked for awhile at the moon. It was fat and yellow. That was part of the game of course. Yolanda knew the rest, her woman-heart knew the rest.

Greg Tolliver, the brave, counting his *coups*—that would be first, of course. He edged toward her, slid his arm along the 'dobe until it half-encircled her, then said, "Yolanda, you and I could go very far in this country." He seemed to have forgotten his professional people's accent.

"There's something that's goin' to happen mighty soon—and when it does—well, 'bout all I can say is that the Doña Concepcion's goin' to look like a mule-driver 'longside o' me."

"That's nice, Gregory," said Yolanda—interested but not desperately so. She used the exact tantalizing tone the Doña had taught to her. In this way, the Doña had assured her, she would learn the most of men's affairs and intrigue them most deeply at the same time.

"We're New Mexicans, Yolanda—you and I. This is our own country and we're goin' to have it that way. Once Tesqua shows the way the whole territory's goin' to follow. They just need us to start 'em off."

Yolanda raised her head now with a bit of genuine interest. She frowned just slightly at the handsome, mustachioed face hovering over hers.

"But, Greg, *all* New Mexico doesn't feel that way. Lodgepole says this military occupation is bound to pass and then it'll be better than ever. The Doña says the same thing."

A wide and loose grin spread itself over Tolliver's long face. For a fleeting instant he didn't look as handsome as usual. There was indeed, Yolanda felt, something decidedly wolfish and ugly about his expression.

"Well, it don't make much difference," he said, "long as I get where I'm goin'. And remember, Yolanda, I got both Spanish and Indians and gringos with me. I'm the boy knows how to talk to all of 'em in their own terms. And how to outsmart green-twig young lieutenants. I think maybe Mr. Wade and all his Blueback pork-eaters are goin' to get mighty surprised before San Geronimo night's over."

Yolanda stared back. She opened her eyes wide and stared. Thoughts went over and over like tumbleweed in her head. Tolliver must have mistaken that stare for one of sheer admiration—he pressed forward suddenly, grabbed her

roughly to him and smashed his lips into hers.

He had her too tightly—he had her arms pinned to her sides, she couldn't get away. Her lips hurt where he pressed them into her teeth. She tried to cry out but only a muffled sound emerged. She struggled. She slipped her arms from his grasp and pushed her fists against his shoulders.

He finally pulled back. She saw the grin on his face and the glare of his eye and she knew she had been right—it was ugly. It was ugly with venality and a thirst for power.

Careful, now, Yolanda. Parley slick, and don't show on your face what's in your mind—

It might have been old Lodgepole's voice talking deep within her brain. It might have been the wisdom of the mountains themselves. She struggled with her expression. She smiled, and she held her breath a bit to bring the blood back into her face.

"Greg—you know I'm just a girl. I don't know the first thing about your politics and your uprisings and everything. I just know I'm happy you brought me here. Come on, let's go in and dance some more!"

Tolliver was his old self again. "With pleasure, ma'am!" he boomed, bowing and offering his arm.

AGAIN they were swirling to the dance, and the other couples were flashing about them and the *luminares* were bobbling wildly about their heads. Blood pulsed and the rhythm pressed itself into a mad headlong daze. Yolanda kept her head above it. She looked up at Tolliver's glistening face, his half-closed eyes, his slightly parted lips with the little white teeth showing behind them—she looked and shuddered inwardly.

She maneuvered him skillfully over to the punch bowl.

She timed it to perfection. They came near the punchbowl just at the chorus break and they parted momentarily, for the bow and curtsey. Yolanda turned her head, raised her eyebrows in surprise and looked for all the world as though she had noticed Peter Wade standing there for the first time.

"Hello!" she chortled happily. "It's a wonderful *baile,* isn't it?" And then she threw herself back into Tolliver's arms again. Tolliver turned a triumphant leer in Wade's direction.

It happened, then, as she had known it would. She saw Wade's cheeks become deep pink just before she turned her head away.

She danced a few more steps and then heard the clomping on the floor behind her.

She saw the sudden anger flash across Tolliver's face as he looked up and she heard Peter Wade's in-the-throat voice and stiff, cold politeness.

"Mr. Tolliver," said Wade, "I crave permission to dance with your lady."

"Mr. Wade," said Tolliver, "I am afraid I can't do no such thing as grant that permission."

"Mr. Tolliver," said Wade, "I'm afraid I'm going to dance with her anyway."

Tolliver pushed Yolanda gently aside.

He drew his shoulders up and turned the formidable glare of his snapping black eyes and his upswept mustache upon the Lieutenant.

"Seems I got to oblige you, sir," he said, "in a way you can savvy. Better pick yourself a second and start thinkin' about weapons."

"This'll do as well," said Wade mildly. His right shoulder twitched suddenly, and his arm came back and forward with flashing speed. His fist struck squarely on the point of Tolliver's jaw—it made the sound of an axe hitting green wood—and then his other fist followed with a blow to the body. And

then his right struck the jaw again—and again.

Tolliver tried to get his arms up but he had no more control over them by the time he brought them halfway. He dropped forward with a glaze over his eyes.

The dancers stopped dancing, turned their heads and stared. The music stopped. The silence was painful. Wade felt his knuckles with his other palm, looked up, stared at the musicians and called out in a loud voice, "Miss O'Hara and I would like to dance if you'd please continue playing."

The music started again—hastily.

"Now, then," said Peter Wade. He stepped forward and took her arms and shoulders firmly.

She smiled at him—she grinned at him—and saw his brows lift in puzzlement. He hadn't expected that. And then abruptly she became serious again. "Peter—there's an uprising ready tonight. I just learned it from Tolliver. You've got to get your troops ready right away."

He stared back, dancing along unconsciously, while the import of her words cleared through his head. "An uprising?" he said slowly.

She nodded. "I had to take this way to tell you. Tolliver might have been suspicious otherwise. You've got to go quickly."

He frowned. He nodded back at her. "All right, I will—right away. And I—I thank you for telling me." His frown deepened. "You always seem to be around to save my neck, don't you?"

They had circled the floor and they were near the main entrance now. Peter held his curious frown for another moment, then broke from her quickly and trotted from the door, snatching his hat and cape from the table in the foyer. She stood there, watching until he had passed through the front door, her brows pressed into a sharp V.

She knew suddenly that she wanted Peter Wade, wanted him if only for a little while—even though he belonged to a beautiful blonde young lady who called him her darling soldier. But she knew too that now there was only one way to get him. To get him fully and really.

She turned, looked back into the ballroom and saw that a small group of men was helping Tolliver to his feet. He was shaking his head thickly. The musicians were still playing away more madly than ever. Yolanda ran forward and went out the front door in Peter's wake.

IT WAS nearly dawn before the rabble struck. They came down out of the north—three hundred strong—and they marched four, six, seven abreast in a thick ragged column down the *camino* that led to the plaza.

They marched silently and there were hard faces and fanatical eyes. There were Indian eyes, dull, mongoloid and long-suffering. There were Spanish eyes with all the fire of the *conquistadores* still in them. There were blue and gray eyes and paler faces—the *Yanquis*, who had come to plunder and now meant to protect that right.

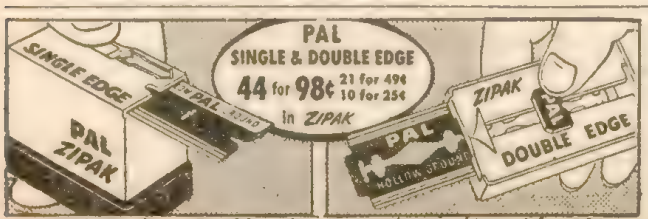
There was the fat moon and it glistened balefully on these faces.

They marched on, gripping their weapons. It would be a swift easy victory—the bluebacks not at the *baile* would by now be drunk or fast asleep. They marched until they came to the first cottonwoods lining the road.

A black horse slipped from the cottonwoods and its tall rider met them, holding up his hand for silence. Then he turned to lead them on. The moonlight cut deep lines in his slender face, his dark upswept mustache glistened blue in places.

They rounded the bend and then, as one man, they stopped short.

[*Turn page*]



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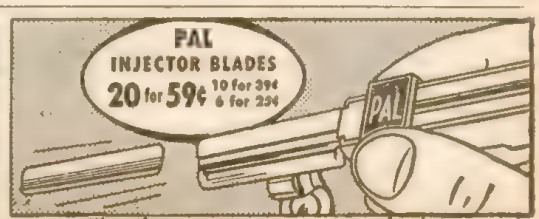

They fit your injector razor perfectly!

Two companies of dismounted dragoons were drawn in tight, smart formation across the road. Their Jenks carbines were level, in aiming position. Lieutenant Peter Wade, still in his dress uniform, suddenly stepped out in front of them. His sword was drawn.

Without looking back he called the command, "Re-covah—harms!" The carbines snapped back so that they hung, still ready, from crooked elbows. Wade spread his legs, hooked his thumbs into his belt and called out to the tall rider.

"Call them off, Tolliver! Tell them to go back to their homes! Surrender yourself and send them away—there'll be no punishment for them. No one will be hurt then—my word on it!"

Tolliver called back, "To the devil with you, Wade!" His black horse pranced and sidestepped. He raised a pistol. The mob behind him broke into a muttering roar. Hard faces—Indian, Spanish and Anglo-Saxon faces.

There was a ragged patch of moonlight on the road between the two groups. Something fluttered into it suddenly. It looked at first like an Indian and then the slim girl's figure became clear—the white almost waxen skin and raven hair with its Navajo bunting.

Yolanda stood before the whole ugly mob, not twenty yards from them. She lifted her chin and her voice. She spoke in Spanish, which all of them could understand best.

"That you must not be fools!" she cried. "Many will die—perhaps all of you—if you do this thing! Señor Tolliver does not care—he does it for his own ambition! You know that I speak to you as a *compañera*! You know that what I say is true!"

"The woman is the Lieutenant's wench!" roared Tolliver. *"Desgraciada!* That you listen not to her!" He lifted the pistol. He pointed it.

"This way if you want to shoot!" Wade's slightly huskier voice called out suddenly. He had stepped even further in front of the line of dragoons, making a clear target of himself.

"I'll sure oblige you!" Tolliver thundered, swinging the pistol toward Wade.

The two shots came almost as one. No one knew whether Wade or Tolliver fired first—they did see that Wade's pistol came up from his cape in an almost magical way, that it lighted his face for an instant as it fired. Some of the youth had disappeared from that face. That was how it seemed anyway.

Tolliver swayed a little in the saddle. He had an expression in his eyes that was part surprise, part sudden terror. The whites showed all the way around the dark orbs. He toppled to the ground, suddenly and unceremoniously.

The insurrectionists looked at each other and began to mutter again. Some of them moved to leave the ragged column and melt away into the shadows.

Yolanda turned her back upon them and walked slowly toward Lieutenant Peter Wade, who was still standing there, his left arm limp and bloody. "Form section of fours—ho!" he called to his command—and then his knees gave way and he fell.

They kept Wade in the adobe house in back of the store while his arm healed.

"Wugh!" commented old Lodgepole, "I know more 'bout busted bodies nor any doctor nohow!" And Yolanda paraded for the young officer a few more of her accomplishments, mostly domestic in this case.

They talked at great length—principally about themselves and the coming wedding—but it wasn't until more than a week later Yolanda got around to asking what was strong in her mind.

"Peter," she said, "what about Laura DuVray? I saw the picture by chance. I saw what was written on it—"

He looked surprised for a moment and then suddenly he leaned his head back against the propped pillows and laughed. "Yolanda, you darling," he said. "Laura DuVray is a famous actress—the toast of New York. She'd have nothing to do with a mere lieutenant! She gave all of those miniatures, all alike, to my class when it graduated from West Point!"

It was Yolanda's turn to look surprised. Not for long though. She leaned down presently and pressed her lips to his and held them there. She closed her eyes. She had one more conscious thought before she lost herself in the swirling ecstasy of that kiss.

She thought, "If I hadn't let *him* rescue *me* for a change, I wouldn't be doing this now . . ."

That's My Girl Talking

Bob Russell finds out why Nan refuses to marry him!

NAN PARKER stood at a window in the Turkey Track ranchhouse, staring out over the rolling rangeland. The ticking of the big old grandfather clock was loud in the silence. The sunbeams stealing in through the glass of the window brought out the golden gleam in Nan's light brown hair. She was slender and lovely as she stood there with her heart breaking.

"That's the way it has to be, Bob," Nan said without turning, for she did not want him to see the tears in her blue eyes. "I'm sorry—terribly sorry."

"Look at me, Nan," Bob Russell said in that deep strong voice that was always so tender when he spoke to her. "Turn around."

She turned slowly. He stood gazing at her, tall and good looking in his range clothes. His thick dark hair was brushed back from his broad forehead and his eyes were as blue as her own. His cartridge belt sagged from the weight of the gun in the holster on his right hip. His Stetson was lying on the table in the center of the room.

"This can't be the end of everything for us, Nan," he said. "You know you love me just as I love you."

Impulsively Nan put her arm around Bob's neck

By SHIRLEY MANNERS

Nan wanted to tell him that it was true—that he meant everything in the world to her—but the pleading expression on her father's face, the haunted look in Matt Parker's eyes was too vivid in her memory. She remained silent, holding back the words her heart was so eager to utter.

"I refuse to believe that you really want to marry Nels Tucker," Bob said when she did not speak. "Even if he is the richest man in the valley he is at least fifteen years older than you are."

"Ages don't matter, Bob," she said, and then she forced herself to say the thing that wasn't true. "I love Nels and I do want to marry him."

She could see by his expression that he believed her now. The hurt look was deep in his eyes. He stepped past her and stood looking out the window.

"I'll miss this range," Bob said. "Like I'll miss working for the Turkey Track outfit."

"What do you mean?" Nan demanded, invisible hands of terror clutching at her heart. "Where are you going, Bob?"

"Does that matter to you?" He turned to face her.

"No," she said slowly. "I was just curious."

She hated the sound of her own voice, the cruelty of her words. Memories sped swiftly through her mind. The day Bob had joined the outfit two years ago. She had liked his looks at first sight, and so had Matt Parker. The owner of the Turkey Track knew a real top hand when he saw one, and Bob had been just that.

MEMORIES. The way Bob always had her favorite horse saddled and ready when he knew she was going for a ride and he was around. The first ride they had taken together, just six months ago. She could remember every word he had said that day—how they had ridden through part of the desert country over at the south end of the range—the things Bob had told her about himself.

He had been born and brought up on his parents' ranch in Arizona, and had been a cowboy ever since he was sixteen. He told her that he still owned the spread, but had never wanted to go back since his parents had died ten years ago.

More memories. The day just three months ago, when the foreman of the Turkey Track had quit, and her father had given Bob Russell the job. The other men liked him and Bob made a good foreman. The day that she and Bob had first discovered they were in love with each other. Had that only been a little over a month ago, Nan wondered. It seemed ages now. Her father hadn't objected then either, though she knew that Nels Tucker, the owner of the big 3 Diamond outfit, did not make such frequent calls at the Turkey Track just to see him.

It had been only last night that everything had changed. It was nearly midnight and Nan was in bed in her room. Her father had been downstairs in the living-room, the very room where she and Bob stood now. She hadn't been asleep and she had heard someone knocking on the front door of the ranch-house. For a few moments afterward she heard a rumble of voices, and then there was silence.

Matt Parker had refused to tell his daughter who his visitor had been but in the morning he was a completely changed man. There had been just Nan and her father since Mrs. Parker had died five years ago. Matt Parker had married late in life, and from the things he'd told Nan from time to time she gathered that his youth had been a wild and hectic one.

"If you think anything of your old dad," Parker had told Nan that morning, "you'll marry Nels Tucker right away. I know that he is plumb anxious to marry you for he told me so. I told him then that you were twenty-four and able to make up your own mind about that, Nan."

"But I'm in love with Bob Russell," Nan had protested. "And he loves me."

"You'll get over that." Parker sounded strangely impatient. "You're both young and can forget. Not that I've got anything against Bob—he just doesn't strike me as the right man for my daughter. I want to know that you are secure, and if you marry Nels I'll be sure of that." Her father's expression grew pleading, almost frightened. "You must marry him, Nan—and do it soon!"

That had been why Nan had told Bob that she intended to marry Nels Tucker, why she was trying now to convince him she no longer loved him. It was hard to do when her heart rebelled against the whole idea.

"I still say it can't be like this, Nan," Bob said. "No matter what you have just been telling me."

He stepped forward and took her in his arms. Impulsively Nan put her left arm around his neck and raised her head for his kiss. He kissed her and then quickly released her.

"That was good-by," Bob said. "I'll tell the boss I'm leaving and be riding on."

Nan came to a sudden decision. "No, Bob, I don't want you to go. I love you, and I don't want to marry Nels Tucker."

"That's my girl talking," Bob said, with relief in his voice. "Now tell me what's wrong, honey?"

She told him of her father's midnight visitor, and how changed Matt Parker had been since then. How he had been so insistent that she marry Nels even though she had told him that she was in love with Bob.

"Sounds like your dad is in bad trouble," Bob said when she had finished. "It is up to us to find out what's wrong and see if we can't get him out of it."

"Of course," said Nan, relief sweeping over her. "We must do that, Bob."

It was good to know that he would help her, take some of the burden of worry off her slender shoulders. Yet what could they do? She was sure that her father would not talk, that he would refuse to explain what was worrying him.

There was a jingle of spurs out in the hall, and a big man stepped into the living room. He was dressed in worn range clothes, and he had a hard face and gray hair. The gun in his holster looked like it had seen a lot of use. The man was a stranger; Nan had never seen him before in her life.

"Howdy, Miss," he said, smiling at her and ignoring Bob completely. "Reckon you must be the boss' daughter. I'm Carl Sloan, the new foreman of this outfit. Matt Parker hired me last night."

"Oh, he did," said Bob coldly. "Strange he didn't get around to firing me first since I've been the foreman here up to now. I still am, until Matt Parker tells me otherwise."

Nan stared at Sloan's boots. It had rained during the night and wet sand still clung to those boots. It was sand that could only have come from the desert at the south end of the range. She wondered what Carl Sloan had been doing there.

WAS this the man who had been her father's midnight visitor she wondered. It seemed more than likely. But why should this big man suddenly have such an influence on Matt Parker's life? Nan did not know the answer, and it worried her.

"Looks like I might have trouble with you," Sloan said, glaring at Bob. "That would be too bad. The boss wouldn't like it at all."

"Wouldn't like what, Carl?" Matt Parker asked as he walked into the room. He looked like he had spent a sleepless night, and his voice was tired.

"This young fellow claims he has been the foreman here," Sloan said. "And kind of resents me taking over the job." The big man looked hard at the owner of the Turkey Track. "Maybe you better tell him the straight of it, Matt."

"All right," said Parker resignedly. "Meant to tell you about it the first thing this morning, Bob. Sloan is taking over the foreman job here. Not that you haven't handled it well, but I feel it might be better to have an older man bossing the outfit for me. You can stay with us as a regular hand if you wish."

"No," said Sloan. "I don't want him working in any outfit I'm ramroding. He's too likely to make trouble. You're fired, Russell."

Nan waited for her father to speak. He had always done the hiring and firing of his men up to now, though some ranch owners left that job to their foremen. But Matt Parker remained silent.

"If that's the way it is, I'll be leaving," Bob said picking up his hat from the table and then turning to Parker. "I've got a month's pay coming—sixty dollars."

"You're worth more than that, Bob," Parker said as he reached into his pocket and drew out a roll of bills. "Worth all

the gold in the desert." He peeled off six ten-dollar bills and handed them to his former foreman. "Reckon you'll want to talk to Nan before you leave." Parker looked at Sloan. "Come on, Carl, I'll introduce you to the rest of the outfit."

"All right, Matt," Sloan said. "Let's go."

The two older men walked out of the room, leaving Nan and Bob alone. She stared at her father's favorite chair and a bit of paper beneath it caught her eye. She reached down and picked it up. It was a "WANTED" dodger, wrinkled and yellow from age.

Nan read what was printed on the paper. Two men were wanted for holding up an Overland stage and stealing an express box filled with bags of gold from the Pay Strike mine.

"What is it, Nan?" Bob asked, going to her and reading the dodger over her shoulder. "Oh—I see."

"Why, this is over twenty-seven years old," Nan said. "Look at the date on it. And the description of this second man sounds a lot like Dad must have looked in those days."

"And the first man might be Carl Sloan as he looked twenty-seven years ago," said Bob. "That's it, Nan. Evidently your father was mixed up in that stage robbery, and Sloan has come back and is holding it over the boss after all these years."

"I'm afraid that must be it," said Nan slowly. "Though I hate to think of Dad ever having been an outlaw. Twenty-seven years ago. Three years before I was born. Dad wasn't married then and didn't own any ranch."

"He said I was worth all of the gold in the desert," Bob said. "And Sloan had wet desert sand still on his boots."

"So you noticed that, too," said Nan. "I wonder if that express box containing the gold that was stolen from the stage could have been hidden somewhere in the desert during all these years?"

"I don't know," said Bob. "But I sure aim to find out." He glanced at the open door leading into the hall and lowered his voice. "Listen, honey. I'll get my stuff and my horse and leave just as if I was leaving the ranch for good. After I'm gone you dress in a riding outfit and ride out and join me at the edge of the desert. Maybe we can find some sign of the express box there."

"All right," said Nan. "I'll do it."

Bob departed, and she hurried to her room to change. She took off her dress and put on levis and a shirt. She hesitated and then buckled a cartridge belt containing a .38 in a holster around her slender waist. Then she hurried out to saddle her favorite horse.

She saw no sign of her father, Sloan or Bob anywhere around. Just where they all were now she didn't know. She stopped at the tool shed and got a spade and tied it to her saddle.

Half an hour later Nan was at the edge of the desert where Bob was waiting for her. They rode out across the rolling sand that had dried quickly in the hot sunlight. Finally they saw a stick thrusting up out of the ground. They would not have noticed it if they had not been looking for some sort of marker.

"This may be it," Bob said. "We'll try and find out anyway."

They swung out of their saddles, leaving their horses groundhitched a short distance away. Bob got the spade off Nan's saddle and began to dig. He worked hard for sometime before he had dug deep enough to uncover the top of a brass-bound wooden express box.

"We've found it!" Bob exclaimed, as he dug around the box so that he could lift it out of the hole. "This must be the loot from the stage robbery."

He stuck the spade into the sand at the side of the hole and then lifted the box out of its resting place. He handled it easily and seemed surprised.

"This sure is light for a box that is supposed to be filled with bags of gold," Bob said. "It should weigh so much that I couldn't even lift it alone."

He placed the box on the sand at the side of the hole. The lock had been smashed long ago so the lid of the box raised easily. There were bags in the box, leather bags that looked like they contained gold. Nan pulled out one of the bags with her left hand as she knelt beside the box. It seemed fairly heavy.

FROM some boulders a short distance away a six-gun roared. Bob pitched face downward to the sand and sprawled

there motionless. Nan uttered a scream and then reached for the gun in her holster as she stared at the rocks.

An instant later Carl Sloan stepped out from behind a rock, a six-gun in his hand. The gun in his hand was aimed at her heart as the big man walked toward her.

"Too bad you two had to find the express box," Sloan said as he came closer. "But when Parker said Russell was worth all of the gold in the desert I was plumb certain it was a signal to get you to look for the box. Too bad. Now I've got to kill you just like I downed Russell."

HE MOVED closer to Nan, paying no attention to the still motionless figure of Bob Russell. The big man's eyes gleamed with a killer light as he stopped, the gun in his hand still aimed at Nan's heart.

"Don't try it, Sloan!" snapped Bob as he suddenly sat up, his gun in his fingers. Nan realized Bob had just faked being shot.

Sloan whirled and fired wildly. Bob's aim was much better. The gun fell out of the big man's hand and he dropped to the sand a bullet in his chest.

Behind Bob three riders loomed into view, pounding swiftly toward the spot in the desert where the express box had been buried. As they drew closer Nan saw it was her father, Sheriff Harry Ellis, and Nels Tucker. They swung out of their saddles and ran forward.

"Nan, are you all right?" Parker anxiously asked his daughter as he reached her.

"Quite all right, Dad," Nan said as she stood up. "Sloan thought he had killed Bob and was going to kill me so Bob had to shoot him."

"I was afraid he would make trouble," said Parker. "He was my visitor last night. I hadn't seen him for twenty-seven years. I was the express guard on the stage at the time of the robbery. Sloan killed the driver and the only passenger in the coach and then forced me to help him carry away the express box. It was too heavy for him to handle alone. Then he knocked me out, and when I regained consciousness he and the box were gone. But it looked like I had been working with Sloan so there was a wanted dodger put out for both of us."

"I know," said Nan. "Bob and I found the dodger back at the house." She opened the bag and instead of gold desert sand poured out of the bag. "Why there is no gold here."

"Cashed in the gold long ago," Sloan muttered weakly. "A little at a time. Been living on what I got for it for twenty-seven years. Broke now—figured I could force Parker to take care of me. If he wouldn't, I would have sworn he did work with me on the holdup."

"I realized that there was no way of proving I wasn't guilty," said Parker. "That's why I was so anxious to have you marry Nels right away, Nan. Figured he would take care of you if I had to go to jail."

"I'm afraid that wouldn't have worked out, Matt," Nels Tucker said as he stood listening. "I wanted to marry Nan until I realized that she was in love with Bob here. No, it just wouldn't have worked out."

"You don't need to worry about the law any longer, Matt," said the sheriff. "Sloan just admitted that you aren't guilty of that old stage robbery."

"And of course Bob still has his job as foreman of the Turkey Track," Nan said firmly. "And we'll be married soon."

"That's my girl talking!" Bob said delightedly, and the other men, with the exception of Sloan, all grinned.

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Trail

Dan Stewart wished there were no bars, so he

When Dan met Nita, it was a case of love at first sight— but before they could ever hope to think of marriage, he had to prove he wasn't guilty of an attempt to drygulch her Dad!

CHAPTER I

In Apache Butte

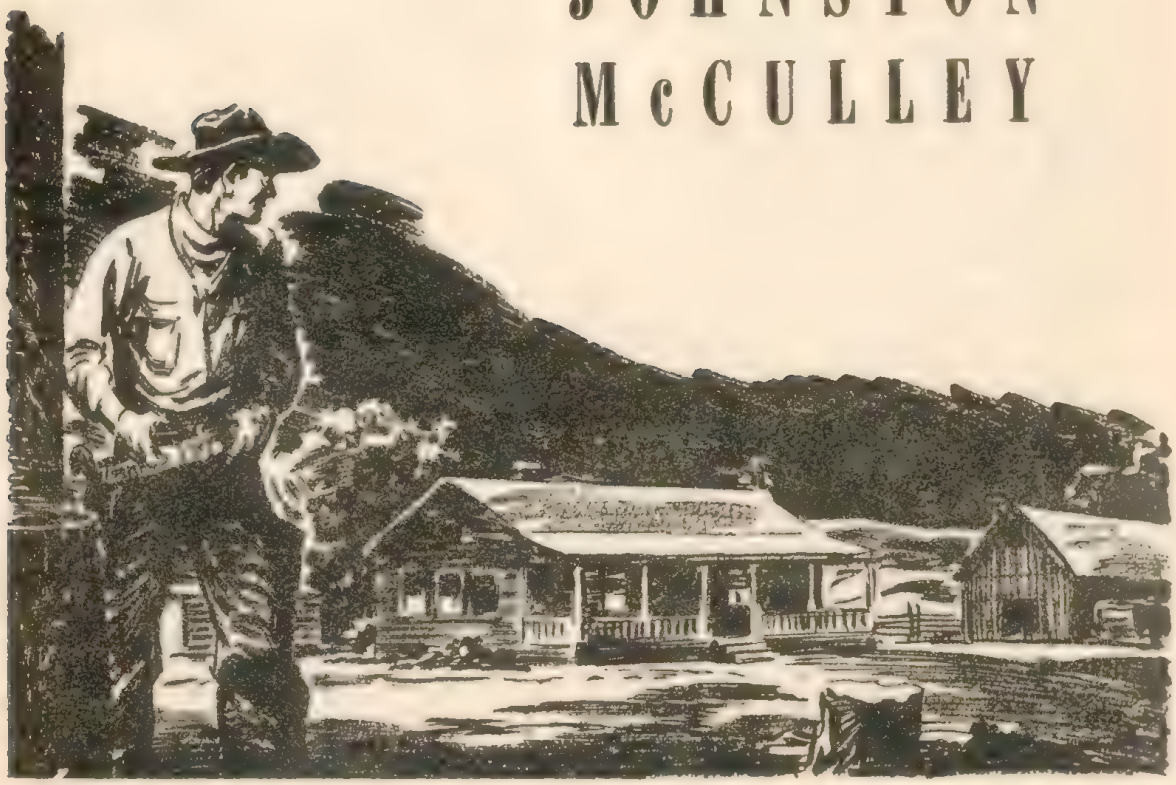
NOT EVERY cowpoke can ride into a strange town and find himself in the midst of a seething range war, and within a few hours of a range dance, at that. But Dan Stewart did just that.

He reached Apache Butte a little after the noon hour. He had been riding since dawn, most of the time under a broiling Arizona sun that swam blazingly in a cloudless sky. His tough roan pony was

to HEART'S DESIRE

a rangeland novelet by

JOHNSTON McCULLEY



could take her into his arms and comfort her

jaded and displayed a lathered hide. Stewart himself was sweltering. His sweat-drenched clothing clung to his tall, slender frame. His ash-blond hair was plastered to his head, and his steel-gray eyes seemed to have a scum over them because of the heat and dust, the eternal blinking and squinting.

There was nothing new in all that for Dan Stewart. He had worked ranges that blazed as much as this, and had ridden trails much rougher and hotter. But there was something new in what he found in Apache Butte.

The little town's public corral was jammed with ponies. Saddled stock lined the scattered hitch-rails. Vehicles were parked behind the adobe buildings, with the teams unhitched and munching fodder from the rear ends of wagons and buckboards.

Men and women, in more or less a holiday mood, were passing in and out of the general store. They greeted one another with strident voices, hand-clasps, slaps on backs. Men in range garb patronized the two saloons, or lounged against building fronts in spots

of shade.

Dan Stewart straightened in his saddle, mopped his face with his sodden neckcloth and adjusted his hat. He let the roan pony pick his way carefully along the thronged street toward the blacksmith shop at its extreme end. The pony had cast a shoe and Stewart wanted instant repairs. He was a man who believed a pony or gun should always be ready for instant, effective use.

JIM CASWELL, the middle-aged Apache Butte blacksmith, was setting a wagon tire. When Stewart led his pony into the semidark, cool interior of the smithy, Caswell wiped his hands on his leather apron and nodded in greeting. He was heavy and well-muscled, had a round face adorned with a heavy black mustache.

"Pony tossed a shoe," Stewart explained, surrendering the reins. "What's goin' on hereabouts? Looks like everybody on the range is here. Or is this the usual thing? I'm a stranger in these parts."

Caswell was hungry for the sight of a new face and the sound of a new voice. And Stewart was eager to learn what he could of the range and town. So they got off to a good start. Both were garrulous, but Stewart got more information than he gave. That was a well developed trick he had.

Stewart learned that this evening there would be a special dance for the benefit of the little community church. Proceeds from the dance would be given to the padre, and when the padre had accumulated enough from this and other sources, he would send the money away and have an organ shipped in.

But Stewart learned more than that. There were two big cattle outfits on the Apache Butte range, and only two—the Slashed Circle and the B Box. Their punchers glared at one another whenever they met or passed. Men of both outfits rode double out on the range. It was the old story of warfare between two big ranches, each ambitious to rule a range neither thought was large enough for both.

Stewart gathered that there had been no real outbreak of serious trouble for a couple of years or thereabouts, however. But there was seething and boiling beneath the surface, and the least incident might cause an explosion and bring on a range war.

Caswell finally decided that Stewart was a decent cowpuncher who had grown tired of his old surroundings and had strolled into new pastures. He wanted a bunkhouse job. Caswell told him to observe and listen for a time before he accepted one from either the Slashed Circle or the B Box. The smith intimated both outfits would be after him if he possessed nerve, belligerency, and could sling lead extra well.

A sort of friendship had been established by the time the roan pony had been fitted with a new shoe. Caswell explained that he was a bachelor and kept house in the adobe structure near the smithy, and that he had a stable behind his hut where he kept an old mare he used whenever he had to go out to a ranch to do some work.

"Put your pony in the stable," Caswell said. "In this little lean-to on the smithy, I've got a cot. Bed down on that. You can eat with me, I'm a right good cook. Go to the dance and meet the folks and look 'em over and get acquainted. Then decide what you want to do."

That suited Stewart. He fed and watered the roan, rubbed him down and housed him in a stall. He took a bath in Caswell's tin tub, put on fresh underclothing and shirt and greased his boots. He shaved and donned a fresh gold-colored neckcloth, a color he favored. When evening came, he was ready to sit at the blacksmith's table and devour a meal as good as he ever had eaten on a ranch.

More people had come into town. The dance would continue until dawn and then they would go back to their homes, for Apache Butte had no overnight accommodations for transient visitors. The store and both saloons would be open all night, Caswell had explained. The dance would be held in an old abandoned adobe warehouse some ambitious man had built years before.

Stewart went to the dance with Caswell, knowing he was being scrutinized carefully, as any stranger would have been. And Stewart could sense hostility

in the air. Groups of range riders eyed one another. They passed on the sidewalk without speaking. Everything seemed tense.

AT THE warehouse, Caswell introduced Stewart to three girls and then gave attention to a girl of his own. Stewart danced to good fiddle-and-banjo music and inspected the crowd. One girl struck his fancy and he asked about her.

"She's Nita Houston," the girl with whom he was dancing explained. "Her father owns the Slashed Circle. Her mother is dead and her Aunt Mary runs the ranchhouse. Bill Jarl is after her. Maybe hopes to marry a ranch. He's *segundo* of the Slashed Circle, also acting foreman. The old foreman, Sam Burns, died five months ago of pneumonia. Bill Jarl is carrying on, but hasn't been named foreman officially."

"How come he's not dancing with his girl?" Stewart asked.

"He's probably in one of the saloons talking range politics," his dance partner replied. "He's a plotter. A handsome rascal, but as mean as they come."

"How come other men don't keep her busy dancing?"

"She's a Slashed Circle girl, so no B Box puncher will dance with her because it'd make the Slashed Circle boys mad. And the Slashed Circle boys have to dance with other girls, don't they? You're a stranger, and a nice one"—she gave him a quick, flirtatious smile—"so I'll put you wise. Don't take sides until you're sure which side you want to take. Walk down the middle of the road, carefully."

Stewart glanced at Nita Houston whenever he had a chance. He was tempted to walk over and introduce himself and ask her to dance with him. It wouldn't be an unusual thing at a range affair, but somehow he couldn't get up nerve enough. That was strange, too. Nobody ever had accused him of being backward with girls.

He realized that Nita Houston seemed to have an unusual attraction for him. She was tall and slender, with brown eyes and hair. She seemed sincere, sensible, wholesome, looked to be all that a girl should be, according to his idea.

Their glances met a few times, and once Stewart smiled at her slightly. But her face remained an expressionless mask and he did not try it again. A quirk of her lips, a gleam in her eyes—nothing like that invited him to try for a more close acquaintance.

Jim Caswell joined him then and suggested they get some air and a drink. Stewart indicated Nita and asked about her.

"Fine girl," Caswell said. "Good as they come. Thinks a lot of her dad. Bill Jarl is trying to make up to her, but he's not getting far. Nor will he, if she has as much common-sense as I think."

They went along the street and turned into a saloon. Men crowded the bar, and others sat at tables with glasses and bottles before them. Tobacco smoke blued the air and a medley of voices clashed against eardrums.

"We'll lift a gulp here, then go to the other saloon," Caswell said. "This is a Slashed Circle hangout, and the other is the B Box headquarters. I don't play favorites."

They finally got drinks, but while they waited for them Caswell identified some of the men to Stewart.

"That tall, handsome galoot in flashy dress is Bill Jarl," he whispered. "The short, thick fella beside him is Jack Eades, his particular pal. Either one is a bad hombre alone. Put 'em together and they're dynamite with the fuse already sputtering!"

Stewart looked them over, then went with Caswell to the second saloon. As they drank, the blacksmith whispered, "That one with a green neckcloth, he's Hank Lannock, boss of the B Box bunch. Tough and mean. William Banwell owns the B Box, but he didn't come to town for the dance. At least, I haven't seen him. Heard Lannock sayin' he'd stayed home to check his beef book—cattle buyer due in a few days."

From the second saloon they went to the store, for Stewart wanted cigarette tobacco. Caswell pointed out Mark Houston. The owner of the Slashed Circle was a dignified man with silvery hair. Stewart liked his appearance and manner.

They returned to the dancehall and Stewart danced with a few of the town

girls. He eyed Nita Houston repeatedly, but her manner was that of a person who wished to keep herself aloof.

Just before dawn, he left the dance-hall with Caswell and they went to the smithy. Stewart made up his cot with bedding from the blanket roll that had been fastened behind his saddle. Caswell went on to his hut, telling Stewart to come there for a late breakfast after he had enjoyed some sleep.

Despite his fatigue from the long ride of the morning and the dance, Stewart did not get to sleep quickly. The face of Nita Houston was in his mind too strong for that.

CHAPTER II
Maid of Many Moods

THE EVENING of the day following the dance, Mark Houston was shot down at dusk as he walked past a building at the end of the street. Punchers from both outfits were in town at the time, roistering in the saloons. Men said they saw William Banwell, owner of the B Box, hurrying from the scene of the shooting.

Houston, though wounded, prevented trouble by ordering Jack Eades and two other Slashed Circle men, who happened to be in town, to ride to the ranch and stay there. Houston was cared for by the doctor, then put in a wagon and taken to his ranch.

The next day, Banwell came to town and protested his innocence. He had witnesses at the ranch who would swear he had not left it the evening before, he said. But no Slashed Circle man would believe B Box men, under the circumstances. So, on the following day, Banwell declared, he would ride to the Slashed Circle alone and unarmed, swear his innocence to Houston and convince him he was not guilty.

Dan Stewart remained in the background while all this was happening, as befitted a stranger. He kept thinking of Nita Houston. He listened to the town talk. One thing impressed him—Jack Eades, of the Slashed Circle, and Hank Lannock, of the B Box, both said they had seen the assassin hurrying away after firing from ambush and that he was Banwell.

For Eades to say it might not have meant much, because of the trouble between the outfits. But for Lannock to talk so, when he knew it would mean he'd be fired from the B Box, made men think the statement true.

Stewart reached a decision. The next morning he saddled up and started out the trail that led to the Slashed Circle. Halfway there he heard a single shot, and listened to see if there would be another. A second shot was heard. Stewart straightened in his saddle and tightened the reins. He waited to learn if there would be a third shot. It came, and he brought his pony to an abrupt stop.

Three spaced shots—the rangeland call for help!

The sound of the shots had come downwind to him through a gulch. Up the gulch about a quarter of a mile was a gravel slide topped by a high, rocky ridge. The shots could have been fired from behind that ridge.

Stewart remembered that he was an alien in a strange land. A burst of gunfire, or even an exchange of shots as if made by men dueling, might have urged him to caution. He was a stranger on this range and too wise to become entangled in a battle not his own. But those three spaced shots—a call for help—no decent range rider could ignore.

Spurring his pony, Stewart galloped ahead. At the base of the gravel slide, he fired a single shot. It was answered from behind the ridge above. He had guessed right. He urged his pony up the treacherous gravel drift. At the top, he rode along the ridge of rock until he found a break in it where he could get through.

"Where are you?" he called.

"Over this way!" came the answer.

Surprise electrified Stewart. The voice was that of a woman!

He squinted against the sun glare and saw her a hundred feet away, sitting on a rock and bending over as if injured. Stewart identified her as Nita Houston. A pony stood ground-hitched near her. Stewart rode forward.

"I heard your signal. Do you need help?" he asked.

Though he felt concern for her plight, this unexpected encounter thrilled him. He had been hoping to see her at the end of his present journey, but certainly had not expected to find her like this.

She was wearing man's attire—a work shirt open at the throat, trousers tucked into boots, a gun-belt, her headgear an old black sombrero. She looked as attractive in such clothes, Stewart decided, as she had dressed for the dance in town.

INSTEAD of replying to his query as to her need, she arose quickly and strode toward him. Her stride was purposeful. Her face was stern and her eyes were ablaze as she stopped near his pony.

"Climb down from your saddle," she ordered. She emphasized the command by whipping a heavy gun out of its holster and holding it menacingly.

"Wh-what's this?" Stewart stammered. He dismounted slowly and held the reins in his left hand. "You fired a distress signal—"

"That was only a decoy," she interrupted, as if it mattered nothing to her that she had broken an unwritten law of the range. "At a distance, I mistook you for another man. You're about his size, and he rides a roan sometimes. He's got gray hair and your sandy hair looked gray in the sun. And you wear a yellow neckcloth, like he does."

"It isn't yellow, it's gold," Stewart corrected. "I think the color's lucky. You mean you wanted to decoy some other man up here? Why?"

"To kill him." It was a matter-of-fact statement that chilled Stewart. "To tell him some things to his face, then shoot him down as I would a mad coyote!"

"What's he done, that you want to kill him?"

Her answer was a question, "Who are you?"

"Dan Stewart. Stranger hereabouts. Got tired of working where I was, and rode this way looking for fresh pastures and a job. I left Apache Butte this morning to ride to the Slashed Circle Ranch. Heard they might need a man."

"Why do you want to work for the Slashed Circle?" she queried.

"For wages, what else?" he said. "I hear it's a good outfit. Learned in town there's only two big cattle outfits hereabouts—the Slashed Circle and the B Box."

"That's right. The B Box is owned by William Banwell, the man I meant to kill."

"Why should you kill him? He's an old man."

"Not too old to be an ambushing skunk!" she cried at him. "The Slashed Circle is owned by Mark Houston, as perhaps you've heard. I'm his daughter, Nita."

"So I know," Stewart admitted. "I was admiring you at the dance, and asked someone your name. Wanted to dance with you but was afraid to ask, being a stranger."

"Oh, a shy cowboy!" she taunted. "If you know about what's happened, you know why I want to kill William Banwell."

Stewart nodded. "I suppose you heard Banwell was coming out this way?"

"Yes. I meant to decoy and kill him here and leave his body for the buzzards. Who has a better right? My Dad tossing on a bed in delirium part of the time, suffering from wounds that may mean his death!"

Her vehemence ended as emotion choked her.

"Well, ma'am, you can stow your hardware in leather, since I ain't Banwell," Stewart said. "And you needn't wait here in the hot sun for him any longer. He won't be along today."

"Why not?" she said quickly.

"One of his B Box men came riding into Apache Butte last night with his pony in a lather, to get the doctor. Banwell got smashed against a corral fence and stomped by a wild bronc. He's got bad bruises and smashed ribs. Be laid up for a while."

"So you say. But how do I know that's true?" she said challengingly.

STEWART was experiencing a change of feeling that displeased him. He had watched her at the dance, had felt strongly stirred by her, and had decided she was the kind of girl he wanted if he ever married.

Now he felt that his estimate of her had been hasty and wholly wrong. From her words and manner, she was a wildcat of the range, a girl with a suspicious nature and murder in her mind.

"You needn't be wary of me," he told her. "I'm carrying a bill of sale for my pony and a letter from my last boss saying I don't play poker or hit redeye too much, and that I'm a top hand with horses, cattle, rope and gun."

"And maybe you hired your gun to Banwell before you rode out here from town!" she suggested.

"I don't hire out my gun!" Stewart was indignant.

Now she surprised him again. She raised her voice and called, "Come out, boys!" She didn't turn her head as she called. Her eyes were fastened on Stewart's, and her hand moved slightly and elevated the muzzle of the gun she held until it was covering Stewart's heart.

Three men came from behind the rocks. Stewart tensed and stood still. They must have their ponies behind the ledge, he thought. They had been watching and listening.

One was Bill Jarl, and another the man the blacksmith had called Jack Eades. The third was a stripling who looked about twenty. Stewart had noticed him dancing with Nita in town. He had heard him called Eddie Fowler. They stood in a row behind the girl and inspected Stewart, and all seemed to radiate hostility.

"What do you think, Bill?" Nita asked Jarl.

"I think you talk too much, Nita, without realizin' what you say," Jarl answered. "You've made bad chin-music. We don't dare let this stranger go now, 'cause he knows too much. We'll have to take him to the ranch and coop him up."

"Why?" she asked.

"What we planned has gone wrong. If this stranger is telling the truth, Banwell is laid up for a time. Let this man go back to town and spin a yarn about what you said out here, and it'll put the B Box bunch on guard."

"Who's said anything about me going back?" Stewart asked. "I'm hoping for a job on the Slashed Circle."

Nita made the decision. "Bill, the only thing is to take him to the ranch and put him in the old adobe tool shed," she told Jarl. "Some of the boys can nose around in town tonight. This Dan Stewart may be a gunman Banwell hired, for all we know."

"You're right, Nita," Jarl decided. He stepped toward Stewart. "Hand me your gun, butt first," he ordered.

Stewart shook his head negatively. "When I was only a button," he explained, "an old-timer told me never to hand my gun over to any man unless I knew he was a good friend, and not to be eager doing it even with friends. Isn't necessary for you to take my gun."

Jarl's face purpled. "I said to hand it over! If you don't, we'll take it and be rough in the takin'!" he warned.

"Now you're making ruckus talk," Stewart complained. "If any of you three makes a move to draw, I'll claw leather myself, and there'll be shooting. You might get me, there being three of you, but it wouldn't be all one-sided."

Nita thrust herself between them. "I'll get his gun, Bill," she said. "You stand back with the others. He won't try to draw while I'm holding this muzzle on him!"

JARL grinned at Stewart and stepped back. Nita stood in front of Stewart, her eyes blazing, her breathing heavy. A wildcat of the range, Stewart thought again. How mistaken a man could be in a girl! This was the girl who had attracted him at the dance, the one he had thought so sweet and wholesome, who was the cause of him riding out here to try for a job on the Slashed Circle so he could be near her.

"Now, mister, I want your gun," she told him. "And don't think I'd hesitate to blast you if you make a wrong move. Get your hands up and stand still!"

He held his hands high. "I can't gunfight a lady," he said.

Holding her own weapon ready, she moved close to him, extending her left hand to get his gun from its holster. Stewart looked down at her from his superior height. And what he saw now startled him again.

With her back to the three Slashed Circle men, her facial expression changed. She wasn't a wildcat now; she

looked like a helpless, worried girl. And she seemed to be trying to flash him a message with her quick frown and glistening eyes.

Swiftly, Stewart revised his opinion of her again. He thought, "I was right the first time. She's the type of girl I believed her to be. She's in some kind of bad trouble and needs help, and her signal of distress wasn't entirely a fake."

"Make a bad move and you'll get a slug of lead!" she was warning him, as if for the benefit of the three men behind her. "The way things are just now, we're not taking any chances with strangers."

"I'm not taking any, either," Stewart said. "You can take my gun, ma'am, without any argument from me."

He saw her lips moving. As she bent forward and took his gun, he heard her whispered words:

"I need help. . . . Be careful! . . . I trust you!"

CHAPTER III
In the Blanket Roll

IT TOOK an hour to ride to the Slashed Circle ranch buildings. Nita rode in front with Bill Jarl. Stewart rode between Jack Eades and the youngster, Eddie Fowler.

The Slashed Circle men made no conversation. So Stewart inspected the country as he rode, storing landmarks in his memory for possible future use. At the ranch, he saw the buildings were unusually good. The sprawling ranchhouse was set in a small grove. The place looked homelike and prosperous.

Nita had not spoken to him since they had mounted. She did not even glance his way. He was wondering at her whispered words. Why should the only child of a prosperous stockman have to ask help from a stranger? Was she up to some trick? Had he misjudged her again?

The old adobe tool shed had a heavy door with a steel swing bar outside to fasten it. There was one small window, without glass but barred with steel rods. Stewart's first glance convinced him the walls were so thick and hard that nothing less than a charge of dynamite would open a way of escape. The shed was empty except for cobwebs and dust. They thrust him in and barred the door.

"Just take it easy, Stewart, while we decide about you," Bill Jarl said at the open window. "I'll see you have grub and water pronto."

"This is high-handed," Stewart complained. "I never did you a wrong. Just rode this way looking for a job. The sheriff might like to know about this!"

Jarl laughed. "The sheriff's an old man and don't like to ride out this far, so we take care of the law ourselves on this range," he explained. "We'll do some thinkin' and talkin' about you. We'll either give you a bunkhouse corner later, or else keep you here a few days till we see what happens." He turned away.

Nita had not spoken to him, but had kept aloof. Through the window, Stewart saw her ride with the others to the corral and dismount. As the men turned the ponies in, Stewart's among them, Nita hurried to the house.

In a short time Jarl reappeared, followed by the Chinese who cooked for the bunkhouse crew. The cook carried a huge tray heaped with hot food and a jug of coffee. Jarl opened the shed door and Stewart took the tray. Jarl rolled in an empty keg and an empty wooden packing case.

"Grub, drink, table and chair," Jarl explained, grinning, and watched Stewart closely as if expecting an attack.

The door was barred and Stewart left alone. He ate like a hungry man. Then he made a cigarette and paced around the little room and watched through the window.

An hour later, a rider came loping down the lane from the town trail. Stewart saw Jarl walk to the corral to meet him. Nita hurried down from the house to join them. Stewart was surprised to see that the rider was Hank Lannock, who had been pointed out to him in town as the boss of the B Box bunkhouse crew.

Lannock gave Nita a letter and she

went back to the house with it. Jarl and Lannock strolled toward the tool shed. Stewart remained at the window as the pair stopped outside.

"This gent is Hank Lannock, who rides for the B Box," Jarl told Stewart through the window. "He brought us a letter from Banwell explaining that he's hurt and can't ride over, as he promised. I wanted Lannock to take a look at you."

"It's a privilege," Stewart remarked sarcastically.

Lannock eyed Stewart and then faced Jarl. "I've seen him in town the last few days," he said. "Noticed him standing around at the dance. Heard him talking about wanting a job. But, about the thing you mentioned, Bill—I'm right sure Banwell never hired him, as a gunman or otherwise."

LANNOCK and Jarl walked toward the bunkhouse and disappeared inside. Presently, men came riding in from the range, to turn their ponies into the corral and hurry to wash up for the evening meal. Stewart saw Lannock talking and laughing with some of the men.

As he watched through the window, Nita came from the house and called for Jarl, and the latter emerged from the bunkhouse and hurried to join her. They talked a little, then came to the tool shed, to stop at the window.

"Stewart, Lannock says you're not a B Box man," Jarl told him. "So you're cleared of coming here as a spy."

"But Lannock is a B Box rider," Stewart replied with a grin. "So how do you know he's not lying to protect me?"

Jarl laughed. "Hank is a B Box rider, all right, but he happens to be my personal friend."

That was strange under the circumstances, Stewart thought. It was an unusual angle to the situation. But he cast thoughts of it aside now.

"What are you going to do about me?" he asked.

"Nita and I have agreed on a plan," Jarl said. "A couple of the boys are riding to town after supper to keep their eyes and ears open. You'll stay in the shed until they get back around dawn and report. Jack Eades and I will take you out to eat in the cook shack and get some exercise, but you'll be locked up again afterward."

"It's not very comfortable here," Stewart hinted.

Nita spoke for the first time. She had been watching him closely, Stewart had observed. Now she said to Jarl, "Bill, have a cot put into the shed. I'll fetch bedding from the house." She turned to face Stewart. "I'm sorry we have to do this, Mr. Stewart, but you can understand we have to be careful, under the circumstances."

"I understand. It won't kill me to be cooped up for a night," he replied. "But if you folks finally decide I'm not siding Banwell, don't forget I want a job on the Slashed Circle."

Jarl had turned away to shout for a man to get a cot out of the bunkhouse. Nita glanced at Jarl, and stepped nearer the window.

"When I bring the bedding, don't open the roll in front of Bill," she whispered. "Something may be hidden in it."

She hurried away then. Stewart wondered what she had meant by that. Everything seemed topsy-turvy on the Slashed Circle.

Jarl came back with a man who was carrying a folded cot. The door was opened and the cot put inside while Jarl stood on guard. He handed Stewart a couple of candles. They went away again.

When the Chinese cook banged a dishpan with a spoon and the bunkhouse crew gathered for the evening meal, Jarl and Eades took Stewart out of the shed and to the cook shack. He ate sitting between them. Lannock, at another table talking and laughing as he ate, seemed much at home with the crew, Stewart observed.

Jarl and Eades finally returned him to the shed. "I'll have Eddie Fowler, the kid, keep you company, Stewart," Jarl said. "You can talk to him at the window and keep from getting lonesome. And when you turn in, he'll stand guard to make sure nobody annoys you during the night." He grinned.

Nita came from the house carrying a roll of bedding. She entered the tool shed and put the bedding on the cot. "There's everything you'll need, Mr. Stewart," she said. with a slight em-

phasis on "everything."

She glanced at him peculiarly when Jarl was not looking. Then she went out and Jarl barred the door. But Nita reappeared immediately, at the window.

"Don't resent it if there's a man put on guard," she said. "I don't want you to have an unfriendly feeling toward us later on, if we learn you're all right."

Stewart decided she was merely making talk until Jarl moved away—which proved true. As soon as Jarl had taken a few steps from the window, she whispered, "Be careful when you spread the bedding." Then she was gone.

CALMLY, Stewart rolled and lit a cigarette and stood at the window watching the sunset fade out and the purple dusk replace it. He turned finally to the bedding and began unrolling it slowly and spreading it on the cot, watching the window as he worked and listening for the warning sound of boots on gravel outside.

In the roll of bedding, he found a sheet of paper covered with writing. He carried it to the window, where there was still light enough to read:

I noticed you at the dance and hoped you would ask me to dance with you, and was disappointed when you did not. You must aid me—there is nobody else to help. I am trusting you. I'll explain everything later.

Stewart folded the paper and tucked it away in a pocket of his shirt. He turned back to the cot to finish unrolling the bedding. And he found his own gun wrapped in a blanket, just as it had been taken from him by Nita.

His heart jumped as he handled the gun. The feel of it gave him a sense of security. Not only was it a powerful weapon, but he now had the additional powerful weapon of surprise at his command. If it came to a showdown, his foes would not expect to find him armed and ready for a fight.

He finished making up the cot and tucked the gun under the edge of a rumpled blanket, where it would not show. Nita had indicated in her note that she might visit him later. But how could he talk to her openly if Eddie Fowler, the outfit's youngster, was there on guard?

When it became dark, Stewart lighted a candle, then stood at the window. The sky was star-studded, but the moon would not be up for several hours. Men were singing and laughing in the bunkhouse. In the cook shack, the Chinese cook was banging pots and pans. A coyote howled in the distance.

Stewart ceased trying to solve the meaning of the situation he was in. He decided simply to await developments. He was still at the window when Eddie Fowler came from the bunkhouse and stopped outside the shed.

"Need anything?" Eddie asked.

"Only a little conversation," Stewart said. "What goes on?"

"I can't talk about anything. But Nita will, if she trusts you!"

"Nita? What kind of girl is she, Eddie?"

"Finest in the world!" Eddie exclaimed.

"Do you think Banwell shot Mr. Houston?"

"Don't know. Two men said they saw him running away from the blacksmith shop through the dusk right after the shooting."

"If he didn't shoot Mr. Houston, who did?" Stewart asked.

"I've got no idea, unless it was a B Box man following Banwell's orders," Eddie said. "An ornery bunch at the B Box. It's a man's outfit there, since Banwell's wife died some years ago."

"Mr. Houston's wife is dead, too, isn't she?" Stewart asked.

"Died ten years ago. Mrs. Allen—Nita's Aunt Mary—runs the house."

"How come Jarl is acting foreman here, as he says."

"After the foreman died, Mr. Houston let Jarl carry on, but he ain't named him foreman official yet. I think he doesn't trust Jarl for the job and is looking around for a proper man."

"Who's Hank Lannock?"

"He's a no-good! Wouldn't trust him ten feet away. He's been liquorin' up in the bunkhouse, and he'll be hitting for home soon. Him and Jarl are thick."

NEXT ISSUE
BUSHWHACK TOWN
A Novelet of Hearts and Guns
By LARRY A. HARRIS
AND MANY OTHER STORIES

CHAPTER IV
A Plot Unfolds

STEWART smoked and watched through the window, talking to Eddie at times. There was a burst of raucous laughter in the bunkhouse and the door opened and a shaft of light shot out, and in it Stewart saw Lannock and Jarl. They went to the corral.

"Lannock's going home," Eddie commented.

Lannock rode away, and Jarl came striding past the bunkhouse and on to the shed.

"How's the prisoner?" he asked at the window. His voice was thick and liquor heavy on his breath.

"I'm thinkin' about turnin' in to get some sleep," Stewart replied. "I hope I can get out of here in the morning."

Jarl turned to Eddie. "Keep good watch," he warned. "If Stewart gets out during the night, this range will be too hot for you." He reeled away toward the bunkhouse.

Stewart extinguished the candle, but returned to the window and talked some more to Eddie. It became quiet in the bunkhouse and all the lights went out there. The ranchhouse was dark except for a window or so. Stewart saw a shadow approaching.

"Here comes Nita," Eddie informed him.

She came up and stopped outside the window.

"Watch from the corner of the shed, Eddie," she whispered.

Eddie slipped away silently. Nita stood close to the window and spoke in whispers.

"I must trust somebody. I'm trusting you," she told Stewart.

"You can," he said. "Whatever your trouble is, I'll stand by you. Maybe this sounds silly, but when I saw you at the dance the other evening—well, I thought a heap of you right off."

"I liked you, too," she confessed.

"What about this trouble?" he hinted.

"After our old foreman died, things began to go wrong," Nita explained. "Dad hasn't been well for some time, and he had to leave things to Bill Jarl even before he was shot. Some of our best men took their wages and quit, and we didn't understand why. Jarl replaced them with men I don't like."

"Do you know why he did that?"

"At first, I thought it was because Jarl wanted an out-and-out fight with the B Box. I wondered why he should. I even played sneak and eaves-dropped. Hank Lannock and Jarl are pals, and I heard them talking a few days ago when Lannock rode over here on some excuse."

"What did you overhear?" Stewart asked.

"Jarl wants to control the Slashed Circle and make it a safe hiding place for stolen cattle being trailed to the Mexican Border. It's a big plot, with a lot of men involved. Our men who left were replaced by Jarl's old friends, and some are outlaws. And it goes further than that. Jarl has been making up to me. He told Lannock he'd get me to marry him and gain control of the ranch."

"What did you do about that?" he asked quickly.

"I told Dad, and Dad blasted him and said he might as well forget me," she answered. "Dad sent a letter to the sheriff, asking him to come with his deputies and get Jarl and his friends. The sheriff would have come had he received the letter. But I probably trusted the wrong man to take it to town—I couldn't go myself, just then—and Jarl got it and destroyed it."

"How does Lannock come into the picture?" Stewart asked.

"From what I overheard, Lannock has lined up the B Box men. Mr. Banwell is getting old and careless and doesn't see some things right under his nose."

"Do you believe Banwell shot your father, Nita?"

"No, I can't believe that. He isn't that kind. I don't even believe he had one of his men do it."

"Yet you waited in the hills to decoy and kill him," Stewart reminded her.

"That was a trick to save him," she explained. "We got word he was coming to see Dad. Jarl planned to kill him on the way here. I learned of it, and put

on an act. I said it was my privilege to shoot Banwell for hurting Dad. So I rode out with the three men."

"How did ou expect to save Banwell by doing that?"

NITA'S gaze brushed the darkness of the night. "I intended to fire the distress signal, then shoot at Banwell, and miss, before he got up the gravel slide, so he'd be warned something was wrong," she explained. "When you came riding along, I recognized you. You did look like Banwell at a distance, with your roan pony and yellow neckcloth, and it fooled the men. Everything I said and did was all play-acting."

"What did you think would happen?" he asked then.

"I thought Banwell might ride past while we were dealing with you. Or that, if I talked right out as I did, you'd warn him after you'd ridden on. But I saw that Jarl meant to kill you right there, to close your mouth. That's why I suggested that we bring you here and lock you up. I was fighting for time."

"When you went to town to the dance, and your father was there, couldn't you have sent a letter to the sheriff?" Stewart said.

"I mailed a letter, but the storekeeper is the postmaster and he's a friend of Jarl's," she explained. "So perhaps the letter never left Apache Butte in a mail sack."

"Nita, if you don't think Banwell shot your father or had one of his men do it, who do you think shot him?"

"I can't even guess. Dad doesn't have any murderous enemies, as far as I know. Even the old trouble between the two outfits hasn't amounted to much for some time."

"Let's see, now," Stewart summed up. "If your father had been killed, and Jarl could have forced you to marry him, he'd have been in charge of everything here. Would have made the ranch a station for trailing stolen cattle, and maybe got rich by his crookedness. And if anything happened to Banwell, such as being hanged for killing your father, maybe Jarl and his pals, acting through Lannock, could also have handled things at the B Box. For a time, at least, because both estates would have to go through the courts, and in the meantime the crooks could work their will."

Nita's gasp stopped him. She bent closer to the bars of the window. "You're suggesting that Jarl and his friends planned to have Dad shot and Banwell sentenced for the crime," she whispered. "I understand how that would have worked out. But—it's terrible! Would men do such a thing?"

"Two lives wouldn't mean much to a gang of outlaws, if they could get quick big profits by a double murder," Stewart declared.

"But who shot Dad? If Banwell didn't do it himself, or pay someone else to do it—"

"Possibly one of Jarl's friends," Stewart said. "And maybe the men who reported they saw Banwell hurrying away after the shooting were in the plot. Jack Eades is Jarl's pal, and so is Lannock, and they're the men who blamed Banwell. I can't understand how Lannock stays on at the B Box after stating Banwell did the shooting."

"In the letter he brought from Banwell today, Banwell said Lannock claimed it was all a mistake," Nita explained.

"That's a trick so Lannock can stay on at the B Box," Stewart answered. "If it ever comes to a showdown, you can bet Lannock will say Banwell did the shooting."

"It's so terrible," she said. "Oh, Dan!"

Stewart's heart jumped. She had called him Dan! Their hands touched through the bars, clung. She was fighting back sobs—a frightened girl, warding off a fit of nervousness, trying to keep from breaking under the strain. Dan Stewart wished there were no bars, so he could take her into his arms and comfort her.

"Nita," he whispered. "It seems silly, but just seeing you at the dance and all—"

"I know, Dan. I feel that way, too."

"I've got to get out of here and do something!"

"I've made plans. Wait." She darted from the window and returned with Eddie Fowler. "Eddie is a true friend," she said. "He'll help. Wait a couple of hours, until you're sure everybody in the bunkhouse is asleep, then Eddie will

unbar the door and let you out. Saddle up and ride to town. Learn what you can, there."

"And you?" he questioned.

"I'll be all right. Aunt Mary will help me protect Dad. Jarl will probably hurry to town after you, and take Eades with him. Watch out for them. Dad is better, and if we must, when the doctor comes tomorrow morning, I'll have him take Dad to town to his own house. He'll do it for me."

"Good idea," Stewart agreed.

"Eddie will ride with you and side you," she added. "You can trust him."

"Get back into the house before you're seen," Stewart urged. "We won't move until we think it's safe."

She pressed her face close to the bars. "Kiss me, Dan," she whispered.

He managed to touch her lips with his, and felt her breath on his face an instant. Then she was moving like a shadow through the starlight toward the house.

THEY waited for a couple of hours, then Eddie unbarred the door and Stewart left the shed and joined him, his gun in its holster, and they went through the shadows to the corral.

Snaking their ponies out and saddling them was accomplished without noise enough to arouse those in the bunkhouse. They rode slowly down the lane and turned into the town trail, constantly on the alert. Not until they were half a mile from the ranch buildings did they urge their mounts into a lope, then a gallop.

The moon came up. Once they turned aside as two riders approached—the men Jarl had sent to town, now returning. When it was safe, they spurred on again. The false dawn had come when they reached Apache Butte.

"Anybody in town we can trust?" Stewart asked.

"Not the storekeeper, 'cause he's a special friend of Jarl's," Eddie said. "But Jim Caswell, the blacksmith, is a friend of mine and he's square."

"I was thinkin' of Jim Caswell, too," Stewart said. "We can put our ponies in his stable, out of sight."

They half-circled the town and approached along the floor of an arroyo, and came up behind the blacksmith's place without being seen. Eddie awakened the blacksmith, and Caswell came out and helped them stable their mounts and heard their story.

"You gents get some sleep," Caswell said, "so you'll be fresh and snappy if there's a ruckus. I'll do some watchin'. I've got friends among the decent men in this town, and I'll spin the yarn to them and they'll pass it along to other honest men. There'll be a feeling against Bill Jarl and Jack Eades if they come riding in on the warpath."

"Be right careful how you handle it, Jim," Stewart told Caswell. "One of the things we want to do is learn who shot Mark Houston."

Stewart and Eddie curled up in the hay in a corner of the stable to sleep. They kept their guns handy. Stewart knew he could trust Caswell. He and the blacksmith had become friends in the short time they had known each other before Stewart had left to ride out to the Slashed Circle. And Stewart judged Caswell was the sort to side a friend to the last extremity.

Fatigue brought sound sleep to him quickly, and to Eddie, also. Stewart's sleep was disturbed by some tumult after a time, but he did not waken. It was only when somebody shook him roughly that he opened his eyes, to find Caswell bending over him and gripping his shoulder. Eddie was already awake and standing by.

"I slipped out of the shop to wake you," Caswell said. "Both of you have been sleeping like dead men. Things have been happening!"

"What's up?" Stewart asked. He stood up and straightened his attire, and adjusted his gun-belt and slipped the gun into its holster.

CHAPTER V
Accused

CASWELL quickly told his story. "Jarl and Eades came riding into town first, but couldn't find trace of you two. Nobody had seen you except me,

and I was acting too busy to talk to 'em. I'd spread the yarn before they got here, and citizens were giving them the bad eye. They began liquorin' up at one of the saloons. A B Box rider who happened to be hanging around town after a night's spree hit the trail for the B Box, and in a short time Hank Lannock came storming in with a couple of his cronies."

"What did they do besides drink and gab, if anything?" Stewart asked.

"Nothing, at first. Seemed to be waiting to see if you and Eddie would come riding in from somewhere. The doctor had gone out to the Slashed Circle, and he came back bringing Mark Houston in a wagon, stretched on the floor, with Nita riding a pony beside it. Doc took Houston to his own house and bedded him down. Said it might be safer—that the gent who missed killing Houston might try again."

"Anything else?" Stewart asked, as he rolled a cigarette.

"Yeah," the smithy answered. "Banwell got all fussed up out at the B Box when he heard what was going on here, and made one of his men help him dress and get into the buckboard, and he drove into town. He's at Doc's house, too—regular hospital there. Him and Houston have been doing a lot of talking, according to report, comparing notes and such. I reckon it's just dawning on 'em that the fuss between their two outfits has been caused by outsiders."

"That's good," Stewart commented.

"Riders have come in from both ranches, and they're walking around snarling at each other," Caswell went on. "Hank Lannock's here, and he's come out into the open finally. Siding plainly with Jarl and Eades."

"Do folks still think Banwell shot Houston?" Stewart asked.

"Very few of 'em now. The great question is, who *did* shoot Houston, and why? Some are still whispering that Banwell didn't do the shooting and then slip away, but had another man do it. Some believe that, and some don't."

"That's all you got to report, huh?"

"Nope," Caswell replied. "Something interesting for you, maybe. You and Eddie slip into my shack without being seen, if you can. Breakfast's on the table, though it's after noon now."

"If you left the smithy to get breakfast for us, some gents may think it's strange you cooked at this hour and come nosing around," Stewart suggested.

"I didn't go to the shack," Caswell said. "Came straight to the stable from the smithy, like I was going to water my old mare or something. But the meal's ready. Nita cooked it. She's waiting in the shack."

Stewart's shoulders straightened. "And she wants to talk to me about things?"

"Reckon so," Caswell said. "You and Eddie watch your chance, then slip into the shack from the stable. Nita can tell you a lot of stuff I can't."

Caswell hurried back to his smithy. Eddie made the dash to the rear door of the shack first. Stewart saw the door opened, caught a glimpse of Nita's face, and then prepared for his own dash.

Nobody was in sight behind the buildings, though there was a din in the street. Stewart made the shack without being seen, and Nita let him in. Eddie was already gulping down coffee. Stewart's hands met Nita's and squeezed, and their eyes glistened.

"Eat," she whispered. "And don't you boys make too much noise. I'll do the talking."

STEWART sat at the table with Eddie, and they began devouring the hot food.

"Both Dad and Mr. Banwell have had some of their trusted friends up to the doctor's house," Nita said. "The decent, honest men have been lined up, and more are coming in from the range. And the story has been spread about Jarl and Eades and Lannock plotting to make the Slashed Circle and B Box way stations for stolen cattle on the trail."

"How about the town men?" Stewart asked.

"They're keeping neutral, all but the storekeeper. Everyone knows he's a pal of Bill Jarl's and not to be trusted. The decent men are keeping near the store and watching things. It seems like both crowds are waiting for the other to start something."

"Probably are," Stewart agreed.

"What seems to puzzle folks is who shot Dad," Nita said. "Some still think Banwell hired a gunman to do it."

Stewart and Eddie finished eating, and Eddie got up and stretched and went to the door.

"The crooks may try to pin the shooting on some poor cuss, who didn't do it," Stewart said.

Eddie spoke up. "I'll slip into the smithy and hide in the little lean-to," he told the others. "We'll have to show ourselves sometime, Dan."

Stewart smiled as Eddie let himself out. The boy had sense. He had guessed Nita and Stewart might like to be alone together.

Stewart turned toward Nita, and she looked at him from glistening eyes, then went into his arms. He held her gently, kissed her.

"This—it's mighty sudden," he whispered. "But after the fuss is over, we can get well acquainted and see if it's what we think it is now."

"I already know, Dan," Nita whispered in reply.

They separated quickly when somebody knocked on the front door of the adobe shack. Stewart stepped back into a corner and motioned for Nita to go to the door. She pulled it open, to reveal Bill Jarl, Jack Eades, Hank Lannock and a few of their friends.

"So!" Jarl snarled. "Thought this is how we'd find it! We thought Caswell was showing a lot of activity about nothin'. So you're siding this Dan Stewart, are you, Nita? You and Eddie Fowler let him out of the tool shed, huh?"

"Eddie let him out at my order," Nita said, trying to make a show of authority. "And why not? You were keeping him a prisoner without cause. You had no right to lock him up just because he was riding to the Slashed Circle to look for a job. What business was it of yours? You're only the Slashed Circle *segundo*, remember. I talked it over with Dad. And you won't even be the *segundo* after this."

"Think not?" Jarl asked, staring at her.

Stewart had dropped his hand to his holster and was in a position for a quick draw. He anticipated a quarrel, a quick shooting, possibly death, with Jarl and his friends declaring afterward that Stewart had drawn first. Enough of them were there to offset any declaration of Nita's to the contrary, and it would be like Jarl to mention that Nita was infatuated with Stewart and protecting his memory.

But nothing like that happened. Jarl evidently had other plans.

"I'm surprised at you, Nita," he said. "This stranger sure must have you hypnotized. You wouldn't side a man who'd tried to kill your father, would you?"

"What do you mean by that?" she demanded.

"Eades and Lannock thought they saw Banwell getting away from the Houston shooting scene. It wasn't Banwell, because we know now for sure that he wasn't in town that night. But it easy enough could have been some hombre Banwell hired."

"What's that to do with Dan Stewart?" she demanded.

"You're forgetting, Nita. Remember when you fired the distress signal out in the hills, when you were aiming to lure Banwell up into the rocks and kill him? Remember that you mistook Stewart for Banwell, on account of his roan pony and his yellow neckcloth like the one Banwell wears?

"It wasn't Banwell the boys saw sneaking away the night of the shooting," he went on. "It was Banwell's hired killer—this man, Stewart! The boys mistook him for Banwell in the dusk, on account of the yellow neckcloth pulled up over his face!"

DAN STEWART tensed, bent forward slightly and gripped the butt of his gun, ready for a swift draw. Nita whirled toward him. A sudden look of horror was in her face, and it seemed to Stewart that she recoiled from him.

"And Stewart wanted a job on the Slashed Circle," Jarl continued. "Wanted to watch for a chance to finish what he didn't do here in town, maybe. And making up to you, to get in solid so he could work his will. You've been played for a fool, Nita!"

Jarl's low chuckle came to their ears. The men behind him were saying noth-

ing, plainly waiting for any order Jarl might give. But Jarl only said, "We'll take care of Stewart when we've got a little more evidence. There'll be plenty of hands to pull on the rope. Think things over, Nita."

He laughed and turned away then, motioning for the others to follow him. They went out to the street and headed for a saloon.

Nita closed the door and turned to face Stewart. He looked straight at her.

"Well, Nita," he said, "it's up to you. This is the test, I suppose, and I know it's a tough one. You can believe what you like. Just let me know, one way or the other. I'm not arguing, not making any defense. You do the thinking."

She took a step toward him, her hands clutched together. Her eyes searched his face. Stewart saw her breast heaving with emotion. He stood tensed, waiting.

"Dan, I—I can't believe it," she said, almost in a whisper. "It could be possible, with any other man. All I know of you is what I've learned the last few days—and that isn't much, from the standpoint of common-sense."

"If there's any doubt in your mind, Nita—" he started to say.

She shook her head. "That's the strange thing, Dan. I have no doubt. Maybe it's senseless, but I feel it's a lie—what Bill Jarl said. Some men might come to me as you did, after trying to kill my Dad for hire. But not you, Dan!"

She swayed toward him and went into his arms. He held her gently, not trying to kiss her.

"What'll you do now, Dan?" she asked. "Jarl and his friends will spread the story, try to make everyone believe it."

"Yes, to protect the man who actually did the shooting," he said. "Who that man is, that's what everyone must find out."

"But what can you do, Dan?"

"I've got an idea," he said. "Listen close, Nita. You go back to the doctor's house and stay there with your Dad. I'll fix everything with Jim Caswell. I'll pretend to ride away, like I was afraid they'd string me up for the shooting."

"Dan!" she cried. "Don't leave me now!"

"I'll be back," he said. "The less you know about my plan, the better. I'll set a trap, and maybe it'll catch the man we want, whoever he is. Jarl and his friends still want to carry out their scheme, no doubt. If your father's life was attempted again, and he was killed, they'd go right ahead as they had planned. They'd run off the honest men and work their crooked plans."

"What must I do, Dan?" Nita asked.

"Stay with your father at the doctor's house. First, go to the smithy and tell Eddie to meet me right away in the stable."

He kissed her, let her cling to him a moment, then opened the back door and hurried into the stable. He watched her go from the shack to the smithy, and a little later Eddie came to the stable and Stewart let him in.

Stewart talked rapidly, and Eddie's eyes opened wide at what he heard.

"I'll fix everything with Caswell," Stewart concluded. "I want everyone to think I've run away. I'll ride down the arroyo and head for the hills. Jarl and his bunch will have to make folks believe, after I've gone, that I'm the guilty one. I'll give Caswell a yarn to circulate."

"What'll I do, Dan?" Eddie asked.

"I don't think Jarl will bother you, since Nita said you acted on her orders in letting me out of the tool shed. Watch for a chance, and if you can, get to the doctor's house and stay there."

CHAPTER VI

Final Trap

WARILY, Stewart went to the smithy, where Caswell was alone and at work, and entered the lean-to. Caswell followed him in. Stewart talked rapidly, and Caswell nodded at intervals that he understood.

"A lot will depend on you, Jim," Stewart told the blacksmith in conclusion.

"I know just how to work it, Dan,"

Caswell said. "I've got friends I can trust, and they'll do as I say."

Stewart hurried back to the stable. Eddie had the roan saddled and ready for the trail. Stewart led the pony out, pulled himself into the saddle and headed down into the arroyo. He following the arroyo floor in a direction away from the town.

Eddie went to the smithy and reported to Caswell, and the blacksmith took off his leather apron and wandered down the street, talking here and there to men he met. The story he told spread like a grass fire before a raging wind.

According to Caswell's yarn, Stewart had arrived with Eddie at dawn and had compelled Caswell to hide them and their mounts in his stable. Now, Stewart had ridden away. Maybe that showed his guilt and fear of punishment, and maybe it didn't. If he was a guilty gunman, he might still try to kill Houston and earn his blood money. And then the big question! If Stewart wasn't guilty, who was?

Jarl and his friends heard all this and held whispered conversation. They knew who had shot Mark Houston, all right. But the guilt must be pinned on Stewart, so no other man would be suspected. They reacted as Stewart had thought they would.

Caswell spoke to men he could trust, too. And when dusk came that day certain respectable men went unseen to the doctor's house and disappeared inside.

Apache Butte was crowded when night came. The saloons did a rushing business. Range riders paced the sidewalks and stood about in groups. It wasn't Slashed Circle and B Box men against each other, now. It was decent men of the range friendly to both outfits against crooks belonging to both.

It was a starlit night, but with a late moon. Stewart rode back to town along the arroyo unseen, and tied the roan pony to the trunk of a stunted tree. Cautiously, he moved through the deeper shadows. He kept away from the lighted main street and the few business buildings and approached the doctor's house at the edge of the village.

At the appointed place, Jim Caswell met him. Eddie Fowler was accompanying Jim.

"Everything is set, Dan," the blacksmith reported. "Good witnesses in the house. Jarl and his gang have been planning something, all right. They've been shouting around that there's no doubt of your guilt, and that you ran away to save yourself from the rope."

"Good enough," Stewart said. "Nothing may come of this. Jarl and the others may decide it's best to do a lot of talking and let things ride."

"All men suspected of being hooked up with the crooks are being watched by honest riders," Caswell went on. "What do you want me and Eddie to do now, Dan?"

"Just watch—if anything happens. Don't take a hand. I'll want witnesses more than help."

LEAVING them, Stewart went on toward the doctor's house. The windows were alight, and at two of them the shades had not been drawn.

Stewart stretched out on the sandy ground behind a clump of dry brush, in a spot from which he could watch the streaks of light which streamed from the two unshaded windows. He knew this was a gamble, with the odds against him. But there was also the chance he had guessed correctly.

He waited silently until his muscles began to ache, and then changed the position of his limbs. He held his gun ready. He strained his ears for every nearby sound. From the street came loud talk and laughter, and from the saloons raucous singing of range songs.

Stewart began thinking all this had been for nothing, that his name would not be cleared. If it turned out so, he could do nothing but ride from this range, leave Nita and the Slashed Circle, ride under a cloud that might drift and hover over him wherever he rode.

Then he heard a slight sound off to his right, and tensed. Cautiously, he got to his knees, to his feet, stood crouched in the darkness. He heard the sound again —the crunch of boots on sand and gravel. He estimated its direction, and then watched the streaks of light from the windows.

He saw it dimly at first—a man advancing slowly, his body bent almost double, a gun held ready, and a yellow

neckcloth pulled halfway up over his face. He was nearing one of the windows where the shade had not been drawn. He stopped, lifted his gun.

"Stop right there!" Stewart yelled.

The masked man whirled and began shooting into the black night, firing in the direction from which the harsh command had come. Then he turned to run back into the darkness.

Stewart's gun barked and flamed in the night, and the man fell forward and sprawled out.

Men began shouting, running then—men who had been waiting in the darkness for this to happen, honest men Caswell had gathered there, and rogues Jarl had planted there to swear that Stewart had tried to shoot through a window and murder Mark Houston after returning to town.

There was a tumult in the street as honest men took charge of Eades, Lannock and their friends. Suspected men were suddenly under the guns of decent citizens.

Men came with lanterns that lighted up the scene. Stewart went forward when Caswell called. Men knelt beside the prone figure and pulled the neckcloth down, and Bill Jarl's face was exposed.

"There's the man who shot Mark Houston!" Caswell roared. "He tried it again just now, thinking to put the blame on Dan Stewart. He's past needing a rope, I think. But he's got friends who need to be taken to the sheriff and to jail!"

Stewart found Eddie Fowler beside him suddenly. He saw the storekeeper in the clutches of honest men, heard him babbling that Jarl had compelled him to sell him the yellow neckcloth.

But Stewart brushed all of them aside and went on to the house. The front door had been opened and Nita stood in the light that poured through it. Stewart holstered his gun and went up to her.

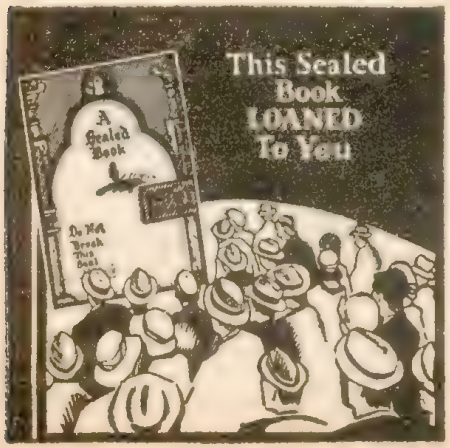
"Oh, Dan . . . Dan!" he heard her cry.

Then his arms were around her, and she was kissing him wildly, and crying and talking and laughing all at the same time as her taut nerves took their toll. They did not care who saw them.

But she grew calm after a little, and clutched Stewart's arm and pulled him into the house.

"Come, Dan," she whispered. "Dad wants to meet you. It—it's time you two got acquainted, I think. Because you'll be seeing a lot of each other from now on, at the Slashed Circle."

LOVE BRANDS A MAVERICK, a glamorous novelet of the range by Bradford Scott, featured in the July issue of our companion magazine GOLDEN WEST ROMANCES 25c at all stands!



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SAN JOSE CALIFORNIA

Branding Fire Song Book

By TEX BROWN

HOWDY, friends and neighbors! Got the groan boxes all tuned up sharp? This month's song might be a little high-voiced for a bunch of trail-hounds, but if you'll grease your tonsils right good maybe you can make it without too many squeaks.

And about tuning up them boxes. I know a feller that took a leaf from his music book and made himself a motto which he tried to live by. He must have played his music all in the Key of B, because that's where he got his motto, which went something like this: *B-Flat—never! B-Sharp—Sometimes! B-Natural—Always!*

Well, there's his motto. If you can get something out of it, it might do you some good, as well as help you, as the doctors say. There's a whole lot to it.

So, with that bit of good advice, we might as well get saddled up, get our soogans rolled and throwed into the bed wagon, and hit the leather for the roundup. That's what is on our minds this time.

The Good Old Days Had Their Excitement

This song is about a character that you don't see so much of these days, except sitting around the hot stove talking about the good old days. There are short drives, of course, such as from ranches to railheads, but the railroads are pretty close to practically any ranch today, and so there's no point in driving cattle hundreds and thousands of miles any more.

But the good old days had their excitement, if they didn't have the comforts of the present cowboy's living. The man who is shipping cattle to market today is likely to go to the nearest telephone and call up a man who makes it his business to take cattle to market. He's got a livestock transport truck, with a trailer that probably holds 50 head of stock. He backs it up to a loading chute, drives the stuff in, closes the tailgate, jumps behind the wheel, turns on his radio, and starts his cattle drive down a paved road at the rate of three hundred miles a day instead of the old fifteen or less.

It don't take much to see how an oldtimer would come to the conclusion that you couldn't call that a cattle drive at all. But, life is like that.

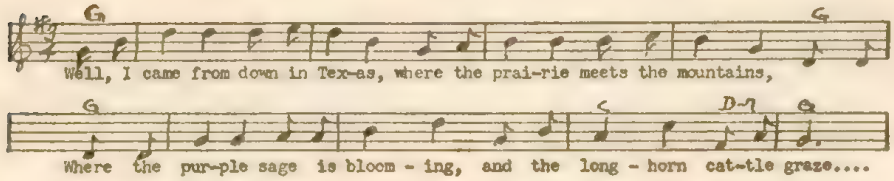
Cattle Drives Were Plumb Expensive

Cattle drives were expensive, both in time and money. A man could set out with a thousand head of cattle and drive them five hundred miles and probably every cow in the herd would lose several hundred pounds of weight —and it is the weight that brings the money. A man could lose a fortune just off the bodies of his animals, not counting other hazards.

So, like the buffalo, and like the ash hopper with which the ranch wife made her own lye with which she made her own soap, there's not any use for the old cattle drive any more, and that means there's not much use for the old trail driver.

But he had his day. He was a heroic figure, and it is a shame that he is fading out of the picture. We ought to keep a place in our gallery of heroes for him. He deserved it!

OLD TRAIL DRIVER



2

I go riding on the prairie, with the open spaces 'round me,
Just my saddle and my pony and the cattle on the grass.

3

In the autumn we will round up all the dogies fat and proddy,
We will brand them, herd the beef stock on the side.

4

Then we'll start the herd a moving, slowly northward to the railhead,
Over prairie, over mountain, over rivers deep and wide.

5

Storm and lightning, dust and windstorms, sleepless nights and tough stampedes,
Cattle rustlers, guns a-barking, lead a-singing on the trail.

6

Some of us will never get home, we'll be buried on the prairie,
And the coyotes will howl o'er us, where we rest beneath the sod.

7

It's a hard and lonely living, it's a short life, it is thrilling,
But there's something holds us to it, and we'll die upon the trail.

8

We'll be buried on the prairie, we'll die upon the trail,
It's a hard and lonely living, but the only life we know!

In a split second Jameson's guns were flaming

GUNSMOKE IN THE WIND

Could young Jim Jameson hold the love of that true-hearted ranch girl—after he had gunned her father in cold blood?

CHAPTER I

Out of the Past

THEY WERE all strangers to Jim Jameson, these lusty, weather-worn, swaggering men of the range who swarmed the Water Hole Saloon and shook the smoky atmosphere of the time-darkened place with the clamor of their carefree hilarity.

Some of them were lined against the bar, two and three deep, the amber glint of rye whisky coming from glasses in their hands. Some lounged at the tables which were strewn carelessly around the rough but spacious room. Still others, if Jameson could judge by the clicking of chips and the raucous strains of music from beyond the bar,

A Novelet by WILLIAM C. CARTER

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were disporting themselves at poker or faro or with the tinseled, tinted damsels of the dancehall.

Jameson had searched many faces since he had ridden into Thunder City an hour before and, tossing his reins over the crowded hitch-rail, had headed into the Water Hole. He had timed his arrival for payday night, knowing that then the town would attract from the surrounding district those who seldom entered it at any other time. But, young and old, all of them were strangers to him.

Well, twenty years was a long time and the impressions of a child of less than seven lack depth and strength and easily fade away.

No face that he had seen, no voice that he had heard, had awakened in him any sense of familiarity. The only shape that had stirred his emotions even faintly was the dim façade of the Alamo House with its broad veranda shaded by cottonwoods. He had a vague recollection, as disturbing as the elusive suggestions of a forgotten dream, that he once had been carried up those wooden steps in the strong arms of a gentle, soft-voiced man.

That was all that he could remember of Thunder City—and that was not enough.

"Your glass has been empty for a long time, hombre," a quiet voice at his side remarked. "If you'd permit me to order a drink—"

IT WAS a voice like the one he seemed to remember and he turned his brooding eyes on the little rannie who was standing next to him. There was a wide, good-natured smile on the face of the small-statured cowpoke and a welcome invitation in his light blue eyes. Trouble, and the memory of trouble, had done much to shape Jameson's lean, hard face, but for a moment his expression softened.

"That's right generous of you, amigo," he said. "I'm a sorta stranger hereabouts and—well, I was just sorta thinking some, I reckon." It quickly occurred to him that he might casually find out from the friendly puncher some of the things he wanted to know. "My name, it's Doom—Dan Doom," he informed with a disarming smile. "Just Dan, to most hombres."

"Me, I'm Al Penny," the small cowboy replied. "Copper is what they call me."

They shook hands and Jameson liked the firm but slender fingers of "Copper" Penny. They downed a drink and Jameson tipped the bottle for the next one.

"Been sorta grub-line riding myself," he volunteered. "Drifted down from up Wyoming way."

"Long ways north I reckon," said Penny, eyes widening at Jameson with new interest. "Texas is plumb big enough for me."

"Haven't seen much of Texas—not yet," said Jameson. "But I figure that maybe before I'm—"

A sudden pounding of hoofs outside, shouting of hoarse voices, drowned his words. The batwings flew open to admit a score of men. They were hard-looking, with their night's celebration already well started, and Jameson's eyes slitted as he looked at their leader—a short, stocky fellow with a round, pimple-pitted face. Little eyes, alive with meanness. A fringe of untrimmed, dry, dust-colored hair visible beneath the rim of his sombrero.

"Sandy Bleak!"

The whispered exclamation that slipped from Copper Penny's lips sent a tingle to the tips of Jameson's fingers. He knew that name!

As if by magic a space appeared at the crowded bar for Bleak and his followers. Then a sudden feeling of disappointment came to Jim Jameson, as he exhaled a deep breath. There was some mistake somewhere. This was not the Bleak he was seeking. This man wasn't old enough. He was no older, probably, than Jameson himself.

With the coming of the boisterous group, an air of tension seemed to have

gathered in the place. Quietly, men commenced to take their departure.

"Well, I reckon that I'll be moving along," Copper Penny drawled. "Got to work tomorrow and—"

"It's early yet, Penny," Jameson reminded him. "And payday's only once a month."

"And I want to earn another month's pay," Penny remarked meaningly. "Better come along, Doom."

"Me, I'm sorta in the mood for celebrating a little tonight," Jameson told him. "Feel kinda like gambling, too."

"Stakes are darn high hereabouts sometimes," warned Penny. "Maybe I'll be seeing you later, amigo."

A FEELING tinged by contempt stirred within Jameson at the fear that apparently touched the men of Thunder City at the approach of the sullen Bleak and his men. More than half of those who had been in the bar had unobtrusively left, and there was a smirk of satisfaction on the face of the stocky man who must know he had been responsible for their hasty departure.

Bleak suddenly turned and looked straight in Jim Jameson's face. Their glances locked, as Jameson stared into the bold countenance with contemptuous, unwavering eyes. Bleak's bloated face reddened. An expression of ugly resentment drifted across it, then his eyelids commenced to blink and he turned away. His eyes swept the backbar mirror and, reflected in the glass, he saw a man walking quietly toward the batwing doors.

It was a man of sixty, an oldster whose shoulders were stooped and whose face was seamed. Bleak turned sluggishly around and called after him.

"Been looking for you, coyote!" he snarled. "Trying to take a sneak out on me?"

The oldster halted, his eyes gleaming fiercely under his bushy brows. But his hands, liked calloused or withered talons, hung limply beside his guns.

"No I'm not trying to take a sneak out," he said mildly. "And I ain't looking for trouble, either, Bleak. But if you—"

The fear of death flamed abruptly in the faded eyes of the old man and in that instant Jim Jameson slipped swiftly from the bar into the middle of the room. He moved like a shadow, and as silently. For he had recognized what he had seen and sensed in Bleak's reddened eyes. Murder! It was in the man's eyes and in his tensing muscles, ready to strike swiftly and mercilessly.

"If there's goin' to be any killing here, I'll do it!" Jameson's voice was low, but so vibrant that instantly it cleared the room of all other sound. "You get going, hombre," he advised the oldster. "I'll take care of your friend Bleak!"

His eyes seemed to cover every pair of hands in the place as the old man slowly moved out of the saloon.

"So you'll take care of me?" snarled Bleak.

Jameson did no answer, but there was a twisted smile on his lips as he waited. Seconds ticked by and then, fear and rage in his eyes, Bleak clawed for his guns. The barrels were still in their holsters when Jameson was lancing flame, first at him and then at the others whose hands had gone swooping down upon the grips of their guns.

Bleak, with a dark hole in the center of his forehead, slumped inertly to the floor. Through the smoke Jameson could vaguely see two other dim figures reeling unsteadily near the bar. Lead whistling past him, death—singing in his ears—he backed toward the batwings. Then there was the crackle of a gun behind him.

GLASS crashed above him as the chimneys of the swinging oil lamps which lit the room were blasted into fragments. For a moment the place was eerily lighted by tiny tongues of blue flame which writhed up from the lamps. Then these flickered out and the dark-

ness was punctured only by red tongues of death which were still licking from guns. Jameson was close to the doors when a bullet clubbed him in the left thigh, twisting him around, spinning him out through the batwings.

Strong arms seized him as, reeling over the wooden sidewalk, he was about to fall.

"It's me—Copper Penny," a voice whispered in his ear. "Which is your horse? Can you ride?"

The street in front of the Water Hole was deserted and, for the moment, there was darkness and silence inside the place. None of that gang, Jameson thought grimly, seemed to care to come out just then. Penny helped him mount and then, leaping to the back of his own horse, urged speed on Jameson.

"We'd better fog fast!" he breathed. "Them are malo hombres and they'll be on our tails pronto!"

A moment later, with Penny beside him, Jameson was cutting the wind down the moonlit road that ran through Thunder City. Then shouts came from behind them, the sharp cracking of guns, the muffled pounding of hoofs.

"Me, I don't fancy running away from them sidewinders!" Jameson snapped savagely. "I didn't like their looks, nohow!"

"They're bad, Doom—belong to old Bat Bleak's gang," Penny panted. "They hole out in the Alpines, north of here, and—"

"Well, I aim on holing some of them up in little six-foot holes," Jameson said impatiently. He reached for the Winchester in his saddleboot. "How many you figure there are, Copper?"

"Seem to be six or seven," Copper said, listening intently. "But we're tossing up so much dust that I—"

"I'm stopping, Copper," Jameson said grimly. "I reckon I can back them up a bit. My horse has traveled a long trail today and I don't aim on letting them—"

Lead was humming around them as Jameson, suddenly bringing his horse to a sliding halt, wheeled swiftly around. He saw his pursuers hammering hastily toward him. A smile twisted his lips as he thought of the six cartridges in the repeater.

The Winchester snarled once, twice, three times, and then . . .

A blinding flash of light suddenly enveloped him and he went drifting into silence and darkness.

CHAPTER II

Doomsday Book

JIM JAMESON thought at first that he was dreaming when he opened his eyes, reached out a hand and touched the face that was bending over him—the face of a girl whose lips parted in a little smile at the gesture he made, at the bewilderment in his eyes.

A lighted lamp, turned low, stood on a table beside the bed. It gleamed on her shining, ashen hair and spun a faint halo around her shapely head. For a moment he closed his eyes, but when he opened them again, she was still there, still looking down at him.

"Do you feel better now?" she asked softly. "Do you feel any pain?"

He considered her uncertainly.

"Where am I—who are you?" he asked in a faint voice. He was certain of only one thing just then—that his head ached furiously. "I can't savvy any of this."

"Don't mind about things now," she told him gently. "Just close your eyes, and sleep."

"Me, I don't feel like sleeping, ma'am," Jameson persisted. "I want to know where am I, and what—"

He clenched his jaws tightly to stop the pains that kept shooting through his head.

"Well, do you remember the Water Hole Saloon?" she asked. "And meeting Copper Penny?"

Copper Penny and the Water Hole Saloon? Carefully he considered, and slowly it began to come back to him.

"And Sandy Bleak and Alex Harding?" she went on. "And the riders who came after you and Copper when—"

"Alex Harding!" The name seemed to explode from his lips.

"Yes, Alex Harding—the old man you saved," she breathed. "Bleak was going to kill him because—"

"I saved Alex Harding?"

There was something in his tone and in the manner in which he spoke that made her look at him curiously for a moment.

"Did you ever know Alex Harding?" she asked.

"No," he said dully, then demanded: "What happened to me?"

"Creased by a bullet that just tipped your head," she told him. "And a flesh wound—not serious—in the thigh."

It was just a crease, then, that had knocked him out while he had been shooting at Bleak's men.

"How long have I been here?" he asked her wonderingly. "And why did Penny bring me—here?"

"Copper Penny is my father's foreman," the bright-haired girl explained. "He brought you home with him. You've only been here about an hour."

Footsteps were coming up stairs, and a tall, white-haired man entered the room with Copper Penny at his heels. Their faces were grave, but the tall man smiled when the girl turned to him.

"The patient is recovering, Dad," she said. "He's learning all about what happened to him—after he shot that Bleak."

"A nurse like you, Ann, could bring a man back from the dead," the white-haired man drawled. He turned to Jameson. "You did a good job," he said, "and you're welcome to the Box Cross—welcome to stay here as long as—"

"The Box Cross!"

"This is my father, David Faraday," the girl told Jim Jameson with a little smile of pride, "and you're on his ranch, the Box Cross."

A groan escaped Jameson's lips, and she leaned over him with anxiety in her eyes.

"Your head—does it hurt you? Or is it your hip?"

"I've got to go now," Jameson rasped harsely, half rising in the bed. "I'll dress, and get out now!"

THE ROOM blurred before his eyes as, blinded with pain, he fell back upon the soft, white pillow. He felt a cool, slim hand laid gently on his forehead, and a girl's soft voice came to him as if from some faraway place.

"There's no fever," she whispered. "But this delirium—it's strange."

He lay there silently for a moment, thinking his own thoughts, and his eyes were desperately fighting off the sympathetic looks of both the girl and her father when once more he opened them.

"I'm telling you, I've got to go!" he almost snarled. He sat up in the bed and this time he did not fall back. "I'm getting up," he said firmly. "I'm on my way."

"No sense in that, son," protested Faraday. "You're welcome to stay here even if old Bleak and his whole gang—"

"My clothes—where are they?" Jameson demanded shortly.

"You ain't in no shape to travel, Doom," Copper Penny tried to argue. "Wait anyway until morning and then you can—"

"I'm getting dressed and going now," Jameson repeated dully.

"But why?" the girl asked. "Won't you tell us? Has anyone done anything that you—"

"It's just that I've got to go," Jameson repeated harshly. "If I can get my clothes, I'll—"

She passed out of the room and that was the last that he saw of her before, morose and unsmiling, he left. And

there was a bitter smile on his face as he was saddling up to ride away.

"Thanks, Copper, for taking care of me," he told the little rannie. "And for hiding me by shooting out them lights."

"Shucks, that was nothing," Copper Penny said. "I sorta figured from the way you looked at Bleak that there might be trouble, so I waited outside and—"

"You were a good amigo when I needed you, Copper," Jameson told him, "and I'll maybe be able to be a friend of yours some time."

There was silence between them for a moment as Jameson drew the saddle-cinch tight.

"It seems to me you're acting sorta queer and ungrateful now," the Box Cross foreman complained. "I brung you home here and Mr. Farady and Ann, they—"

But Jameson was in his saddle before Penny's complaint was finished. A minute later he wheeled his horse, and was fogging down the road that led to Thunder City. For there was nothing that he wanted now, he thought grimly, from that rambling old ranchhouse. And yet even then he realized that he was taking something from there in spite of himself—the haunting vision of a girl, smiling down at him through yellow lamplight.

Impatiently he tried to put all memory of her away. But she came back again, and this time she seemed to be riding beside him. When he turned his head it was almost as if he could see her there, hear the sound of her voice, touch the soft curve of her shoulder.

But that voice must never speak to him again, his hand must never know the wonder of her touch.

Possibly it was because the thought of Ann Faraday was with him that for moments he rode through the night without his usual caution. He came to himself abruptly as he swung around a curve in the highway, and a man with a scatter-gun stepped out into the road. Jameson obeyed the threat of the deadly weapon, drew his horse to a dusty halt, threw up his hands. He saw the sheriff's star gleaming on the shirt of the man with the shotgun, even as three other armed men now appeared from the brush.

"It that the gunslinger we want?" the sheriff asked.

"That's the jasper!" came the gruff answer.

"We heard you'd fogged outa town with Copper Penny," the sheriff growled, "and we figured you'd go to the Box Cross. Didn't figure, though, that we'd meet you coming this way."

"What d'you want of me?" Jameson demanded testily. "What's the charge against me? Bleak went for his guns when I was trying to stop him from murdering an old man."

"We'll take care of the charge!" the sheriff snapped back. He was a tall, stoop-shouldered fellow with a hawk-like nose and close-set eyes. "Pull his fangs, Bouker, and put the cuffs on him!"

A PUFFY-FACED man in a battered hat and nondescript clothes waddled forward and Jameson saw that he wore a deputy's badge. For a moment he had the impulse to fight back, but there were too many guns on him and he let Bouker empty his holsters.

"We'll show you how you can ride into Thunder City and shoot up honest citizens," the deputy growled. "What say, Apperson," he said to the sheriff, "about letting Jake and Manuel go to the Box Cross and pick up Copper Penny, too. Penny was mixed up in this. Helped this hombre get outa town, too."

"Good idea," the sheriff replied, in his nasal drawl. "Get going boys, and bring Penny in."

Jim Jameson's eyes were slitted as he stared at the lawman. So Apperson was sheriff now, was he?

As Jameson rode toward town with the sheriff and his deputy he had a definite realization of one thing. The law in

this community was siding a lawless gang these days. He had shot Bleak in self-defense, as anyone who had seen the affair could testify. And it had been in self-defense that he had killed some of the killers who had been with Bleak.

He had, nevertheless, been taken into custody by the law, a clear indication of the alliance between law and outlaw. Not much difference now, he thought bitterly, than it must have been back in the days when his father had owned the Box Cross.

Jameson could not remember those days clearly, but he would never forget the years which had followed—years of poverty in faraway Wyoming where his mother had taken him to a barren homestead. There her kind but shiftless brother had offered them refuge—and she had died of a broken heart. Jameson had been nine years old at the time.

He had left that homestead a year later—and had been traveling ever since, a restless rider of the Western ranges, his mind embittered by the story his mother had told him. Slowly but inevitably he had kept moving toward one destination, always awaiting his hour of vengeance. And he had been patient in his preparation, cultivating courage by walking heedlessly into danger, triggering his guns during idle hours, drawing them until his arms had ached and his fingers had been numbed.

Now he was ready. . . .

THEY were riding into Thunder City, down the dusty street, flanked with its false-fronted buildings. It was long after midnight, but the lights still were bright in the Water Hole Saloon. Most of the horses which had been crowded at the hitchrail were gone, however. Payday was nearly over.

They drew up before a frame building that fronted a solid-looking structure of stone—the jail, and the sheriff's office through which it could be entered. Without unlocking the cuffs that bound Jameson's wrists, Deputy Bouker dragged him from his horse. The flesh wound in has thigh pained him, there still was a vicious aching in his head, but Jameson held himself together and managed to make it into the office.

"Shove him in the cell, Bouker, and stay here and keep an eye on things for a while," Apperson ordered. "You can leave after the boys bring Penny in and you've locked him up."

Bouker opened a heavy door in the rear of the office and thrust Jameson, still manacled, into the single room that constituted the Thunder City jail. The prisoner could see that the place was unfurnished except for a wooden bench. When the door slammed on him, he felt his way across the cell and slumped down wearily. For a while he could hear the faint sound of voices, the clinking of glasses. Then there was silence outside.

He thought then of that little book in his pocket, that book he had carried for years, a cheap blank book put out by some patent medicine maker. His own name was in it and there were five others. They had been written in pencil by a brooding, unhappy child in the round hand that his mother had taught him. Those five names were blurred and faded, almost illegible, but still there was no chance that he would forget them:

David Faraday
Alex Harding
Bat Bleak
Lafe Apperson
Amos Dalton

And now, after all these years, he had returned at last to Thunder City. He meant to kill each of those five men, to take back his rightful heritage, the Box Cross. A smile twisted his lips as he thought of his ironical entry into the town he had been thinking of so long. He had saved the life of Alex Harding without knowing who Harding was. He had accepted, although unconsciously, the hospitality, and had been offered the protection of David Faraday.

And he had seen, in the eyes of Ann

Faraday, a look that he never before had seen in the eyes of a woman!

Impatiently, again he tried to blot her out of his mind. No woman could come between himself and the vengeance he planned.

He had been unjustly arrested and some sinister purpose lay behind it. He had killed a bully named Bleak, a man who had been feared in Thunder City, undoubtedly the son of old Bat Bleak. He had killed at least two of Bleak's men, but there were plenty of them left. Long-loopers, bushwhackers, cattle rustlers—just as Bleak men always had been. Was Sheriff Apperson holding him to turn him over to them?

He heard faint stirrings in the office outside and all of his senses focused instantly on the sounds.

Then he heard a key scratching at the lock of the cell, the rasping of the bolt, and the door swung slowly open.

CHAPTER III

Escape

INSTANTLY Jameson was on his feet. And then he saw a girl, framed in the dim light.

"I'm letting you out of here," she whispered. "I have the keys!"

He moved toward her, and knew with a sudden sense of disappointment that it was not Ann Faraday. It was a girl older than Ann—a girl with black hair and somber, dark eyes.

"Who are you?" he whispered back. "Where's the deputy who was here?"

"Bouker's had too much—he's sleeping it off," she told him, and then came just inside the cell. "Turn around while I unlock those cuffs."

He obeyed her, and felt the steel cuffs slip off of his wrists.

"Now get out of Thunder City while you can," she told him. "They'll never know how you escaped."

"But who are you?"

"It makes no difference who I am," she said hastily. "Your horse is in the corral at the Alamo House. Your guns will be out in the office there. Take them—"

A shot roared in the room outside. Glass crashed to the floor. The dark-haired girl clutched Jameson's arm, and in the dim light her eyes were livid with fear.

Already he was out in the office, staring at Bouker who, sitting in an old swivel chair, was slumped over on the battered rolltop desk. The surly deputy was dead, with blood oozing from a bullet wound in his skull. There was a broken pane of glass in one of the office windows, shattered by the shot that had come from the outside.

"Somebody must have followed me," the girl whispered.

Jameson saw his belt and guns on the sheriff's desk. Whipping one of the irons out of its holster, he sprang to the door. No one was moving anywhere near the office. But, coming along the road in the far distance, he saw the shadowy outlines of three riders. The two men Apperson had sent for Penny, and Copper Penny himself.

For a moment his mind raced furiously. He was in a nasty trap now, all right. He was certain to be blamed for the killing of Bouker. But more than all, he had to protect the girl who was with him, who had freed him at such an inopportune moment.

"There's three men coming here!" he told her swiftly, stepping back into the office and closing and locking the door. "Get into the cell, where they won't see you."

"But why should I—"

Jameson had no time for explanations. Taking her by the shoulders, he swept her into the cell.

"Stay there and be quiet until I open the door!" he told her sharply.

He had his guns in his hands when the fumbling at the door started. A key turned in the lock, the door swung back concealing him, and Copper Penny was

pushed roughly forward into the place. Penny's two captors came in behind him and, one after another, the heavy barrels of Jameson's irons whipped down on their unguarded heads. He eased one of the unconscious men to the floor, the other fell with a crash.

"It's me—Dan Doom!" he told the startled Box Cross foreman, whose hands were cuffed behind him. "The sheriff took me, too. No time to talk now."

He found the keys to the handcuffs in the pocket of one of the deputies and quickly released the little puncher. Penny's gaze focused for a moment on Bouker.

"How come Bouker's dead?" he asked. "Shot in the back?"

Jameson went to the door of the cell and swung it open.

"You can come outa there now," he said to the girl.

SHE came out into the office and Penny, startled, could only stare at her.

"Janie—Janie Harding!" was his whispered exclamation. "What are you doing here?"

"This man saved my father's life," the girl said, "and they had no right to put him in here—to hang him."

A harsh laugh burst from Jameson's lips at this new revelation. Now his life had been saved by the daughter of a man he had sworn to kill.

"Did you back-shoot Bouker?" Penny demanded of the girl.

"She was in the cell with me," said Jameson, "when somebody fired through the window."

A faint groan from one of the men on the floor brought Jameson back to immediate realities.

"We've got to get outa here!" he exclaimed. Then he hesitated, a frown on his face. "Wait!" he told the other two, and then he outlined a scheme.

A minute later Penny was back in his manacles, and there was a grin on his face as he stood looking at Jameson.

"It's going to hurt, Copper," Jameson told him, "but not much more'n any good tap."

Lightly he whipped down the barrel of his gun and struck the cowboy a glancing blow on the head, a blow that gashed his scalp and brought plenty of blood down the side of his face. Copper Penny blinked for a moment, then the grin was on his face again.

"Now lock me in the cell again and put my guns back on the desk where they were and the cell key back in Bouker's pocket," Jameson told the girl. "Then you go home and keep under cover. And you, Copper, go bring the sheriff. Tell him you was knocked out along with them other two when the three of you came into the office."

Back in the unrelieved darkness of the cell, Jameson heard the turning of the lock. Then again silence outside.

Not for long, though, for he soon heard Apperson, who had been summoned by the manacled Copper, and then, once more, the grating of the cell lock as the lawman's first move was to come to see about his prisoner. His fist caught the sheriff flush on the side of the jaw, before the officer possibly could know what had struck him. Apperson dropped as though he had been felled with a sledge.

Jameson quickly slipped out into the jail office and, in another moment, he had removed the cuffs from Copper's wrists. He tossed them, together with his own, in the middle of the office floor.

"We're clear now, Copper," he said in a low voice. "He knows I was locked in a cell so couldn't have shot Bouker in the back. And you, with irons on, couldn't be accused of doing it, either. And nobody saw the girl. If I butted Apperson with my head when he stuck his face into the cell, it's no more'n he could expect after his carelessness. A prisoner's got a right to escape if he can do it, and I got a right to help you out, too."

They passed like ghosts through the dark and quiet town, making their way

toward the Alamo Hotel. The corral was unguarded and, passing quietly into it, they found their horses. A few minutes later, they were high-tailing it into the distance.

"I reckon we'll have to hide out somewhere for a bit," Jameson said. "I don't know just what to do, but—"

THAT was more truth than Penny guessed. Jim Jameson didn't know what to do or quite how to proceed.

"We can go back to the Box Cross," the small foreman suggested. "Faraday's a fine man. He'll hole us up."

"Not me—I don't aim on goin' back to the Box Cross," Jameson snapped.

And even as he said it, he was bitter at himself for wanting to go back, because there was a girl there he wanted to see.

"Me, I can't figure out why you don't like the Box Cross," said Penny.

Jameson could not restrain his bitterness any longer. "I can't go back there because my folks used to own that ranch!" he exclaimed savagely. "And Faraday, along with others, killed my father, drove my mother out of Thunder City, and robbed me of my rights. What's more, I aim to kill him and some others here—and take back what belongs to me!"

Copper Penny looked at him in amazement, then his face slowly darkened.

"Well, I reckon then that we've got to part company, you and me," he said slowly. "Faraday's always been my friend. I can't see him misused, or believe he done anybody wrong."

"Suits me, Penny, and I'm not blaming you," said Jameson bleakly. "What happened twenty years ago ain't your fault even if it is my business. And you can tell Faraday that the next time Jameson meets up with him—"

He left the sentence unfinished, but there was a cold edge to his voice that left no doubt as to his meaning.

"Well, my guns'll be blazin' for Faraday," said Copper Penny simply. "He's had trouble a-plenty and if I can help him I sure will."

Jameson heeled the sides of his horse and drew swiftly ahead of Copper. The Box Cross was not far away. A curve that he swept around seemed vaguely familiar to him and he was suddenly aware that he was riding along one of the boundaries of the Box Cross, that the ranchhouse was not far away. Strands of wire gleamed through the night behind the thin brush that grew alongside the highway and, beyond the fence, he could glimpse some of the grassy, far-reaching acres of the property out of which he long ago had been defrauded.

Then, suddenly, he stiffened in his saddle, became tense and alert. Somewhere far behind him he heard the faint sound of guns.

He reined in his horse and listened. He had left Copper Penny so far behind that it had been some time now since he had heard the pounding of the hoofs of the foreman's horse. But he was hearing hoofbeats now, a heavy and rhythmic pounding, somewhere down the trail up which he just had traveled.

There was no place where he could conceal himself along the trail and wait. He put spurs to his horse, galloped swiftly ahead, and finally turned slowly and quietly into the open gateway of the Box Cross. Avoiding the ranchhouse he rode some distance to the side of it, and a short way beyond it, where he drew his horse into the shadows of a clump of cottonwoods and waited.

CHAPTER IV

Box Cross Tangle

FOR a moment Jameson's somber eyes lingered on the dark outlines of the house which his father had built so many years before. Low, widespread, and solid, it stood there on a little knoll, shaded by gigantic trees.

He saw a rider flash like a dark shadow through the gateway and speed

swiftly up to the veranda. Copper Penny! He heard the sharp knocking at the door and he heard, too, the distant approach of galloping horses. A yellow glow appeared in the windows of a room on the upper floor of the ranchhouse and, through the leaves of the tall tree that arched beside it, he caught a glimpse of a figure moving in the room.

It was the figure of a girl clad in a light wrap, her hair tumbling down her back. She was standing there motionless, listening.

Light gleamed through a side window of the front room on the ground floor and Jameson caught sight of David Faraday moving swiftly toward the front door. In another moment Penny ran down the veranda steps, leaped to the back of his horse, wheeled, and darted off in the direction of the bunkhouse, two hundred yards to the rear. And the windows of the bunkhouse were lit up when a stream of riders came flowing through the gates.

They galloped up to the veranda, a dozen or more of them, and came to a halt.

Jameson, crouching low, made his way closer to the ranchhouse, taking advantage of the trees surrounding the place. He was not fifty feet away from it when he saw the front door thrown open again. From where he was concealed, the riders who were grouped in front of the house, one of them slightly ahead of all the others, were plainly visible.

They were armed with rifles, half raised and ready for instant action.

"Turn 'em over to us, Faraday!" the man in the lead snarled. "It'll be the worse for you if you don't!"

"Who is it you're wanting, Bat Bleak?" Faraday asked in a quiet voice. "There's no one here that you would be interested in."

"We want Copper Penny and we want the hombre that killed my son, Sandy!" came the angry reply. "And one of 'em shot Bouker in the back and killed him and one of 'em broke Apperson's jaw. Both of 'em are going to stretch hemp before the night's over. Bring 'em out, Faraday, or we're coming in!"

"I can't bring 'em out, Bleak, because they're not here," came the voice of Faraday, speaking firmly and positively. "And you're not comin' in as long as there's a shot in this rifle."

Jameson did not wait to hear more, for he had heard the fury in the voice of Bat Bleak, could sense the violence that was impending. Sworn to kill Bleak, he might easily have shot him then and there—but he could not.

The ruffians who rode with Bleak were as cruel and murderous as their leader. If he killed Bleak there would be no restraint on them and no telling what they might do. Jameson was not concerned about Faraday or his men. He was not staying his hand because of them. But there was a girl he had seen leaning over him, smiling down at him through the yellow lamplight.

He edged along toward the rear of the house to a small covered porch. He went up one of the slim pillars like a cat.

A WINDOW directly over the roof of the porch was open and he slipped silently inside. Passing swiftly, noiselessly, through the empty room in which he found himself, he glided through a door into the upper hallway of the house. He saw the streak of light that came from under the door of Ann's room. As he moved toward it, the door opened and she came out into the hall.

As she saw him, terror widened her eyes, and a slim hand flashed to her throat. Then his left arm was around her, holding her tightly, and the fingers of his right hand were sealing the lips that had been half open.

"There's nothing to be scared about," he whispered in a reassuring voice, "but you've got to dress quick, and come with me."

He saw doubt, hesitation, in her eyes in the dim light. But her first impulsive struggling to get away from him ceased and she was quiet in his arms.

"Will you be still," he asked her, "if

I take my fingers from your lips—if I let you go?"

She nodded her head, and then slipped out of his arm.

"The trouble down there—what is it?" she breathed tremulously.

Faraday's calm voice came through the open door near the foot of the stairs.

"I'm telling you once more, Bleak, that they ain't here!" he said. "Penny was here for a minute—told me you was coming. Then he fogged."

"Well, then, you find 'em for us—deliver 'em to us!" came Bleak's cold command. "Till then, we'll take your girl. She'll be hostage for 'em."

"You won't lay a hand on my daughter, Bleak!" Faraday shouted savagely. "Somebody's goin' to die if—"

"You're comin' with me now!" Jameson told the girl. Her eyes were wide with fright at what she had heard. "Your father can take care of hisself, but if they get you—"

"But they'll kill my father!" she breathed in terror. "I can't go! I can't leave him, like this!"

"I'm thinking it's best for you to come," he told her. "You've got to come!" He swept her up in his arms. "Trust me—do what I say!"

He kept a hand on her while he slipped through the window to the roof. Then, as if she had come to a definite decision, she followed quickly after him.

It was early morning, but the night still hung dark and heavy over the earth. He dropped down to the rail of the porch and her slender figure came down into his arms held open for her. Then they were on the damp ground, moving swiftly toward the shadows in which his horse was concealed.

"Is there a place hereabouts where I can take you?" he asked her. "Is there a ranch where you've got friends?"

"The Bar X isn't far," she said simply.

Reaching his horse, he tossed her into the saddle and sprang up after her, placing her before him. He wrenched his Winchester from the saddleboot, swung around, and moved to a position from which he could glimpse the veranda of the Box Cross ranchhouse. Bleak and his riders were still there, and Faraday was there, too, standing erect in the light that came from behind him, defying them.

"I'll give you one minute more to turn over them two hombres or the gal, Faraday," Bleak was snarling. "Just one minute more an' then—"

"You'll have to hold onto me for a bit," Jameson whispered softly to Ann. "I want to take one shot!"

SHE slipped her arms around his neck and he withdrew the left arm with which he had been holding her. Raising his Winchester, he took careful aim and fired. He saw the rifle clubbed from the hands of Faraday, heard it crash on the veranda, saw Faraday's left hand clutch at his right arm.

But even while he was glimpsing these things he was slipping his rifle back into its scabbard, wheeling and spurring his horse, and clasping a furious, struggling girl tightly to him.

"You shot my father!" she cried, her voice vibrant with rage and hate. "You shot my father!"

"And saved his life! Me—I saved his life," said Jameson, bitterness in his voice. "They'd have killed him if I hadn't shot that rifle out of his hands."

She was silent, suddenly done with struggling against him.

"And now, how do you get to the Bar X?" he asked her.

No sound of pursuit could be heard as they went skimming over the soft earth through the darkness. Bleak must have figured that it had been one of his own men who had shot Faraday, Jameson thought, with a grim smile. Just the way he had figured Bleak would think. And the Box Cross men, so greatly outnumbered by the outlaws, were wisely holding their fire.

"Just keep on going for a while," Ann told him in a very small voice. "We're moving in the right direction."

"Bleak is in the ranchhouse now, lookin' for you," Jameson said shortly. "But he won't find you, and he won't find me or Penny, either. And he won't kill your father. Not even an outlaw'll kill an unarmed man—and I was careful not to hurt your father. But"—he added that grimly—"I'll sure hurt Bleak!"

"I understand, now, why you did it," Ann whispered. "It was the only thing to do. The right thing."

The right thing? For a moment he wanted to protest fiercely that it had not been the right thing, that it had not been the thing he had some to Thunder City for. Her arm, around his shoulder, seemed to clutch him closer, and the arm with which he was holding her, against his own will, seemed to draw her closer to him.

Supine and unresisting she lay against him, her soft, lithe body warm against his own.

His eyes turned down to her, saw the white shaft of her throat, the uplifted head, the half-parted lips. Somehow he could not help it. He leaned over, touched those lips with his own and, for a moment, their lips trembled together. Then both of her arms were clinging around him and, his right hand dropping the reins, found the way to her forehead, to the depths of her tawny hair.

"Oh, but that was—wrong," she told him breathlessly. Her fingers were moving over his cheek. "We shouldn't have—"

He kissed her again, holding her close to him for long moments.

It was dawn, a gray dawn, when she pointed to the gateway of a ranch and they turned from the trail.

No one was stirring around the ranchhouse as he lowered the sleepy-eyed girl to the ground and then himself dismounted. They walked together up the veranda steps and, just as he was about to knock on the door, it swung back.

For the second time that night Jameson was standing at a door that had been opened by Janie Harding.

CHAPTER V

Tale Out of Time

JANIE gasped, staring at the scanty attire of the girl who stood in the doorway.

"Ann! What happened? What—"

"Bat Bleak came to the Box Cross with his men after Penny and Dan Doom," Ann explained as she and young Jameson entered the spacious living room. "They were going to take me. But—Dan—he took me away and brought me here to the Bar X."

Swiftly, then, she explained what had happened, and she heard, in turn, of what had taken place at the sheriff's office.

"I sure want to thank you, son," Harding said to Jameson while the girls were talking. "That young Bleak kept getting meaner and meaner to me of late, till my life wasn't worth shucks."

"It was nothing," Jameson said in a somber voice. He had no taste for being thanked for saving a life he so long had sworn to take.

"I never was much on gunslinging," the old man went on. "And my hands is so sorta crippled up now I reckon I ain't no good with a six-shooter a-tall."

Jameson glanced at Harding's hands. They appeared to be warped and twisted with rheumatism.

The two girls had left the room, and there was a sound of movement in the kitchen, the rattle of tinware, the clatter of dishes.

"You're an old-timer here, I reckon, Harding," Jameson said. "Is there an Amos Dalton, a banker, still around these parts?"

"The dust that's left of him is here, blast his soul!" growled Harding. "He's been dead these many years—shot down in his own bank."

So one more of the five men young Jameson had sworn to kill had passed beyond his vengeance. Now Jameson

knew that he could not kill Faraday because of Ann, and that Harding was as far beyond his vengeance as if he, too, were in the grave. Well, there were two still left. Bat Bleak and Apperson.

"You don't seem to have favored Dalton none," he said suggestively to old Harding.

"Favored him, the dirty skinflint!" Harding almost shouted. "Dalton was a buzzard that picked the flesh from men's bones." He was silent with rage for a moment. "Dalton worked hand in hand with Bat Bleak, was Bleak's agent, and if he couldn't foreclose a mortgage on a spread he wanted, the owner of the ranch was finally found drygulched or busted up at the bottom of some cliff."

"I remember talking to an' old lady that once lived down hereabouts," said Jameson in a tight voice. "Her name was Jameson."

"Humph, I remember the Jamesons well," said Harding. "Twenty years ago or more it was. Used to own the Box Cross that Faraday has now. Why, Tex Jameson and me and Faraday was friends."

He paused for a moment to roll a cigarette and Jameson leaned forward.

"The old lady told me," he said, "that Jameson was killed."

"He was hot-headed, Tex Jameson was," Harding continued, "and he tried to get us all to organize and go after Bat Bleak. But, heck, Bleak had a hundred or more long-loopers working with him them days and there weren't none too much law and order around here, anyways. We wouldn't side Jameson in any such fool scheme and we done our best to keep him from acting up against that gang, but he just wouldn't listen to us."

"So Jameson was drygulched and Dalton, who had a mortgage on the Box Cross, took over the property," said Jameson. "And Mrs. Jameson had to leave Thunder City because—"

"She never had to leave Thunder City," Harding said quickly. "Either me or Faraday would have sided her here. Her and her little boy coulda come and stayed with either one of us, but she had it in her pretty head that we had turned against Tex, and so she wouldn't listen to us neither."

WAS that the way it had been those long years ago? Was that the real story out of which Jim Jameson's quest for vengeance had been inspired?

Jameson had become decidedly conscious of the savory aroma of coffee and ham and eggs, so conscious that he felt his nostrils twitching.

"Breakfast is ready," Ann told them, coming into the room. "And it's going to taste wonderful after being up all night."

The words were not out of her mouth before there was a pounding of hoofs in the road outside. Then heavy feet were tramping up the steps of the veranda. Harding stood up, looking uncertainly at the door upon which someone was knocking impatiently. Janie Harding came in from the kitchen, her eyes frightened. The rapping came again, hard and insistent.

"It's Copper Penny and the men from the Box Cross," she said unevenly, moving swiftly toward the door. "Something must have happened!"

She swept the door open and the Box Cross foreman came in, followed by six grim-faced rannies. Penny's face, too, was set in a menacing scowl, as he stared around the room.

"You all right, Ann?" he snapped. "We didn't know if we'd cut your trail or not. But Bleak took your father. Somebody shot him when they was palavering."

"It was Dan who shot him," said Ann. "Because—"

The roar of two guns filled the room. The Colts that Penny had drawn flew from his hands, went crashing to the floor.

"Now you boys all be gentle like," Jameson said in a low voice, his guns poised for action. "There's just a little misunderstanding. . . . Hope I didn't

hurt you none, Copper."

The little foreman was staring at his hands, which were stinging, but bloodless, and there was bafflement in his eyes.

"No, I reckon you didn't hurt me none," he said. "But my guns, they—"

"I just shot them outa your hands, that's all," said Jameson. "But I didn't aim to hurt your fingers none, Copper."

"Dan shot at Dad to save him from being killed," Ann cried. "He was taking me away from there because Bleak was going to come in and get me."

She explained what had happened, and the expression on the face of Copper Penny slowly changed to one of bewilderment.

"But this here Dan Doom told me he come to Thunder City to kill your father and some others here," he told Ann. "He said his folks used to own the Box Cross and he was aimin' to get it back."

"They did own it," Jameson said. "My name is Jim Jameson, not Dan Doom, but I've just learned some things that sorta make a difference."

"Your folks once owned the Box Cross?" he heard Ann breathe.

"And so you're Tex Jameson's son," old Harding said slowly, peering closely at him. "Yup, I can see the resemblance now. I sorta wondered why you was interested in things that happened hereabouts so many years ago."

Jameson heard someone walk into the room and he turned to see a boy of eighteen or nineteen standing in the doorway.

"What's all the shooting about?" the youth drawled.

At a glance Jameson saw that he had a thin and rather sneering face, and hands that plainly were unaccustomed to toil. His face, despite his youth, bore marks of dissipation, and his eyes were red with wearines. Copper Penny and the other punchers pointedly ignored him.

"This is my brother Dick," Janie told Jameson.

"The shooting's all over now," Jameson told the boy, "but maybe there'll be some more—later." He turned to Copper Penny. "Tell me what you know about Bleak taking Faraday away."

"All I know is that Faraday's gone," Penny said. "There wasn't enough of us nohow to mix with that gang. Old Bleak has gone loco over the killing of his son Sandy and the shootin' of Bouker."

"And me, I sorta feel like going loco, too," said Jameson, with a grim smile. "Anybody here feel like going loco with me?" They all looked at him curiously. "What I mean is this," he explained. "You hombres in Thunder City sorta seem to be afraid of Mister Bat Bleak. Well, twenty years ago my father wasn't afraid of him, and now I'm not afraid of him. He killed my father then, but I've come back to kill him now, even if I have to hunt him down and kill him alone!"

HE SENSED the air of hesitancy in the room, knew that the men there had been imbued with a fear of the Bleak gang.

"Bleak, he's got Apperson siding him," one of the rannies objected. "And he's got a lot of men in his hole-out in the Alpines."

"And there's a lot of things that look like men walking around Thunder City on two feet," Jameson said contemptuously. "Now, if they was only real men—"

"If you're going out after Bleak, I'll ride with you!" Ann Faraday exclaimed. "I'm not so bad with guns, and it's my father who is with Bleak!"

"I reckon we'll all go!" announced Copper Penny. "Listen!" He held up a hand. "Riders coming this way!"

There was a sudden silence in the room and into it came the muffled pounding of many hoofs. Jameson glanced toward Dick Harding and saw that the youth had turned suddenly white. Janie Harding, too, was twisting the fingers of her clasped hands while the old man appeared to be staring vacantly into some faraway place.

There were Winchesters in the room, and Jameson picked one up, made certain that it was loaded.

"You others stand back and lay low," he ordered.

He was by the side of one of the front windows when ten or twelve hard-looking horsemen rode up, headed by Apperson with his jaw bandaged. They dropped off their horses in front of the house and, with Apperson in the lead, started toward the veranda. Jameson crashed the barrel of his rifle through a window pane and the sound brought them abruptly to a halt.

"Stay where you are and talk, Apperson!"

The sheriff looked at one of the men with him and his deputy stepped forward.

"Apperson can't talk, his jaw being busted," the man explained. "But he's got a warrant for the arrest of Janie Harding on the charge of murder. Found her necklace right in front of the window through which Bouker was killed. And the footprints of a woman, too!"

"Mebbe Apperson can't talk, but he can hear," said Jameson. "And I'm telling him to take you lobos and hightail it pronto!"

"I didnt' kill Bouker—I didn't!" Janie Harding protested. "I lost my beads last night, but that doesn't mean I killed anybody!"

"You didn't kill him, Janie, because I did," suddenly came the voice of Dick Harding. "And you know why I done it!"

A rifle suddenly cracked outside and glass flew into Jameson's face as a bullet sang by him.

"Hold it!" a harsh voice came from somewhere behind him. "Drop that rifle!"

Jameson looked swiftly around. Four men were in the rear of the room, each of them armed with two six-guns. Silently he cursed his stupidity for not having someone on watch at the rear entrance. Behind him, Janie and Dick Harding watched tensely.

"I'm dropping the rifle," Jameson said to the man who had advanced ahead of the others.

He did, but when it left his hands, his hands were close to his thighs. In a split second his guns were flaming.

The man in the lead went down, and Jameson's guns were still roaring as he, too, dropped to the floor. Flame lanced toward him, bullets crashed around him, as he thumbed his Colts. Out of one eye he saw that Penny, too, was blazing orange lances toward the rear of the room. He was vaguely conscious that guns outside were beating and crashing at the windows and the door, thudding viciously into the walls of the ranchhouse.

Then he was on his feet, knowing that the four men were down, and he was reaching for his Winchester.

The attackers outside were crowding at the door which was half shattered with shot, and Penny and his men from the Box Cross were pouring lead at it. He crouched low, crept under the sill of the window, came up on the other side of it. The attackers were retiring then, leaving a half dozen dead or wounded lying on the blood-spattered veranda. His Winchester growled once, twice, and two of the retreating men pitched forward as the rest raced for their horses.

They mounted, rode away, firing a last volley of hot lead at the door.

A harsh voice, vibrant with fury, came drifting back, "We'll be here again tonight, and when we come we'll—"

Then they were out of range, out of sight, under a sky that had become strangely murky and ominous.

Jim Jameson whirled around and his eyes swept the room, caught a glimpse of Janie Harding and Ann crouched over someone who was on the floor. He saw, almost at the same time, that the door was sagging, falling inward, crashing to the floor, its sills, hinges and locks riddled with gunfire. And he saw the figure that tumbled in with it, a figure with a bandaged jaw and agonized, dying eyes.

He was crouching over Apperson in another moment, dragging him to a sitting posture, his back against the wall.

"You're dying, Apperson, and, if you tell the truth, may God have mercy on your soul," he said solemnly. "Do you know who killed Tex Jameson?"

Except for some moaning that came from somewhere behind him, there was the silence of death in the room. His eyes were fixed on the face of the sheriff who was already riding a ghostly horse down the shadowy trail of no return. Blood was running from the tips of his fingers, for somewhere in his arm an artery had been severed by lead. After a moment he nodded his head.

"Who?"

He gazed helplessly upward for a moment, as if trying to speak with his eyes. Then a bloody finger trembled toward the white and weathered panels of the door and, resting there, commenced unsteadily to trace out some letters.

I DID—BLEAK—MADE—ME

Then he crumpled forward as a jagged streak of lightning filled the room with eerie blue-green light, and thunder, forged by the white flame, rolled slowly, heavily, among the hills.

CHAPTER VI

Gunpowder Finish

WHEN Jim Jameson turned away from the broken body of Apperson, his eyes were grim, his jaws tight set.

The sobbing of a girl penetrated his consciousness, momentarily swayed his tumultuous thoughts. He saw the body of one of the Box Cross men on the floor, tangled with the corpses of the four men who had, in vain, taken them unawares from the rear of the house. And he saw Janie Harding, with Ann and Penny at her side, crouched down by another figure that was crumpled on the floor, while the old man, white-faced and immobile, was standing looking down upon them.

Jameson moved forward and saw that it was Dick Harding lying there. Blood was oozing from a ragged chest wound. The lad was dying.

"I shot him—in the back," came Dick's muttered words. "Too good—for a coyote like that—to fight him—face to face."

A long, choking sigh escaped his pallid lips. His eyes closed wearily, and he was dead.

"It was my fault!" Janie sobbed. "I shouldn't have told him!"

Copper Penny's arm was around her, and gently he drew her to her feet.

"What was it, Janie?" he implored. "Tell me! What was it?"

"Bouker—he wanted me. He was trying to make me—marry him," she whispered tragically. "He told me he would have Sandy Bleak—kill my father—if I didn't. And after Bleak tried to kill—I went that night to beg Bouker, to plead with him, to go down on my knees—"

Finding Bouker, as she had, Jameson knew now, was what had given the girl her opportunity to release Jim Jameson and try to send him on his way.

"Why didn't you tell me, Janie?" Penny asked tenderly.

"Because I knew what you would do," she sobbed. "And I couldn't bear the thought—of you—being killed. But I had to tell someone—so I told my brother—never thinking that he would—"

She broke into bitter sobbing anew, and by the way in which Penny crudely tried to comfort her, Jameson knew that love was there. But his insurgent mind impatiently cried that there was no time then for love or mourning.

"It was a Bleak who was ready to slay the soul and break the heart of the one you love, Penny!" he said. "Me, I'm going after Bat Bleak. Are you comin' with me?"

"I'm goin' ahead of you!" cried Copper Penny.

"Where are you going, Jim?" came Ann's voice.

"Up into the Alpines to kill Bat Bleak!" he swore. "And to scatter his

evil forces forever!"

She said nothing then, but into her eyes there came a gleam that he did not see.

But Penny was not in the lead when, within minutes, they were galloping to the north toward the rain-drowned Alpines. It was Jameson who was far ahead, and his thoughts were grim and dark. Into them there slowly came the heavy beating of the hoofs of a horse and, turning his drenched eyes, he saw Ann riding beside him.

"Go back!" he said hoarsely. "Go back!"

"I'm going with you!" she said. "For you—and my father!"

It came from her lips like the slogan of a Crusader and he knew that he could not, did not want to stop her.

THE RAIN was beating against her, streaming down her white face, molding her garments close to her body, revealing the firm figure of a primal woman. He forgot, for the moment, the destination toward which he was pressing, forgot all of the past, forgot even Bat Bleak. He remembered only that he had held this girl in his arms, that she had been close against him, that her lips had clung fiercely to his own, kindling white fires within him.

"You're my woman!" he told her savagely.

"Yes, I'm your woman!" Ann said it simply.

Lightning gleamed in the dark skies, touching her streaming face for a fleeting second and, seeing the adoration in her eyes, he felt a great sense of high triumph.

"My woman—forever!"

"Forever!"

They pounded forward through a day that was night, past dripping aspens, under cottonwood leaves upon which the rain dropped like hail.

And here and there they paused at a ranchhouse.

"Apperson's dead—Sandy Bleak is dead—many of Bat's men are dead!" was the word. "We're goin' for Bat Bleak now. You comin' with us?"

And men strapped on their dusty holsters, looked to the loading of their six-guns and rifles, and streamed on after them.

"Bat Bleak is mine!"

Those were the words which went out to them from Jim Jameson and, when they heard and saw him say them, they believed him.

Swiftly they sped on their way, through old arroyos which now were savage torrents, up rocky trails, over muddy roads, and through drizzling timber.

They came at last to a high place in the hills and, as they did, a great bolt of lightning flashed across the sky, exposing, like a scalpel in the hand of God, an evil growth within the earth. For just below them they saw Bleak's great ranchhouse, its windows shedding ghostly light, and the many outlying cabins of his marauding long-loopers.

Orders from the lips of Jameson were flung back through the ranks and then they plunged down the hill to come to a cautious and momentary halt as they neared the house. After a brief pause, riders moved off to the right and left, vanishing like specters in the rain and the darkness. And then Jameson rode straight forward, the hoofs of his horse silent on the sod, until he came close to the abode of Bleak.

He catfooted up to the veranda and, as he did, a dark figure slipped out of the shadows, guns poised to kill.

"Who are you? What you want?"

A thin stream of fire spewed from the far end of the veranda and, as the guard staggered forward, he was knocked sideward by another bullet. For an instant, Jameson hesitated, trying to pierce the darkness, and, when another streak of lightning opened up the night, he saw momentarily the face of a girl. Ann had come after him, despite his stern command!

Then, with a savage oath, he burst into the door of the ranchhouse, halting

on the threshold.

There were men in there, many of them, and the lights from the lamps dazzled him for a moment. Then he saw Bleak, to the far side of the great room, as he heard the windows of the place crash, saw the grim barrels of rifles and shotguns materialize.

"I've come from my father, Tex Jameson," he said softly. "Stand up, Bat Bleak—and die."

He waited until Bleak was on his feet, until his hands were hawking toward his guns, and then his own were gushing fire.

He saw Bleak topple forward.

The room was alive with flame and thunder and, as Jameson thumbed his triggers, he felt himself being jerked and clubbed from side to side. Then all the universe seemed to collapse upon him and he went tumbling down into the darkness with the blazing dust of stars around him. . . .

JIM JAMESON thought at first that he was dreaming when he opened his eyes, reached out a hand, and touched the face that was bending over him—the face of a girl whose lips parted in a little smile at the gesture he had made, at the bewilderment in his eyes. The light of a lamp, turned low, that stood on a table beside the bed gleamed on her shining, ashen hair and spun a faint but wondrous halo around her shapely head. For a moment he closed his eyes, but then, when he opened them again, she still was there, she was still looking down at him.

She leaned over, and there were tears in her eyes when she kissed him. At the touch of her lips, he remembered everything.

He heard footsteps coming slowly up the stairs and then David Faraday came into the room. He saw Jameson lying there with open eyes and a quiet smile lit his face.

"I told you, son, over a week ago," he said, "that a nurse like Ann could bring a man back from the dead."

"A week ago—have I been here a week?" Jameson murmured. "Was I shot that bad?"

"There were bad men up at Bleak's, but some of them were brave men," Faraday said gently. "They died hard deaths—but most of them died."

Lighter footsteps came slowly up the stairs and Jane Harding, her face chalk-white, her dress jet-black, the fingers of her folded hands moving restlessly, came quietly in.

Jameson looked at her with startled, questioning eyes, and she slowly nodded her head.

"Yes, Copper was killed," she said. Tears welled into her eyes. "But I still have my—father, and—"

SHE turned and walked quietly out of the room and he heard her passing down the stairs. Faraday sat down by the side of his bed, looking at Jameson almost tenderly.

"You came here, son, to avenge your father and your mother and you gained your vengeance," he said. "And you came here to reclaim your rightful heritage—and your heritage is yours."

"What is mine is Ann's," Jameson said quietly, "and what is ours is always yours."

Wordlessly, David Faraday stepped from the room, too, and Jameson and Ann were left together again. She knelt down beside him and drew a little paper book from her pocket, a doomsday book. There was an ugly dent in the center of it, a place that was crushed and torn.

"It was over your heart, and it stopped a bullet that would have killed you," she said with a sob. "When I think of all those lonely years you carried it—"

"Somehow all of those days seem gone," Jim Jameson told her. Her hand caressed his forehead, stroked his hair and, under its soothing touch, his still weary eyes commenced to close.

"They seem to have faded, to have vanished." His voice was a faint, faint, whisper. "Like gunsmoke in the wind."

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BUNKHOUSE

Thorpe plucked Jackie out of the saddle, just as her horse went over the cliff

BANDIT

A Complete Novelet by EUGENE A. CLANCY

CHAPTER I

Jackie's Challenge

OLD BILL DAYTON, veteran owner of the Bar D, ran a hand through his mane of gray hair and glared irately at his lovely but somewhat unpredictable daughter who had come storming out to the veranda. Old Dayton, his great bulk eased down in a comfortable rocker, had been trying to enjoy an after-breakfast cigar there alone.

Angry words tumbled from Jackie Dayton's lovely red lips. Certain danger signals in her blue eyes, quite as much as her words, would have made it perfectly clear to the whole of Rimrock Valley that some benighted individual had given Jackie mortal offense. With a few lurid words for emphasis, her grizzled father drew on his cigar until sparks flew from it. Then he stopped Jackie's tirade.

"If you say one word more, young lady," he roared, "I'll take you across my knee and tan you! This is as good a time as any to get it through your head that I'm runnin' this ranch, not you! Of all the tarnation gall—askin' me to fire the best tophand I've ever had!"

"But I tell you he's been treating me as if I was a—a worm or something!" Jackie insisted. "And just now he practically threw me out of the bunkhouse! Are you going to allow a great hulking brute to do that?"

"Jumpin' hyenas!" old Dayton roared. "As if I haven't got enough troubles with roundup comin' on and me as shorthanded as a one-arm circus! Why don't you shoot him—or give him a piece of your mind? You don't hesitate to give me plenty of it! You got no business in the bunkhouse anyway. It's time you realized you're eighteen, not eight. And if you ask me, young lady, I kind of sympathize with that young waddy. He doesnt' strike me as bein' partial to flibberty nonsense, and you've done nothin' but trail him around and make eyes at him ever since he come here."

Jackie's slight, tense body jerked. She flushed to the roots of the short, gleaming golden hair that curled from under the brim of her big Stetson and clustered about her soft, deeply tanned cheeks.

"Dad! I never! How dare you say such things!"

"I've got eyes in my head," old Dayton said coolly. He grinned at her suddenly, but Jackie was too angry and startled to see that it was a kindly grin.

"You don't really think you've been foolin' anybody around here, do you?" he teased, with a chuckle.

"My gosh! You're crazy as a loco yearlin' about him, and if you think you've been makin' a deep secret of it, you better ride to Hackamore and have old Doc Jones examine your head!"

JACKIE stared at her father. Her lips moved, but instead of a fresh

Jackie Dayton sides an "outlaw" in a powder smoke campaign to stamp out a rattler's nest of dangerous border badmen!

flood of angry words, she just stood there for an instant, then suddenly whirled and ran into the house. The humiliation of it! All she could think of doing was to mount and ride—ride furiously, anywhere. But she would have to go out back there where he was, to saddle up her pony in the corral. And he might come tramping through here any moment to consult her father about something.

Hurriedly she turned to the stairs and went up to her own room. Flinging her hat on the dainty new dresser that old Dayton had bought her for a birthday present, she dropped down on the bed and buried her bright head in her arms. There was no anger in Jackie now, only panic. Jackie Dayton's anger never was more than a temperamental outburst anyway.

And men could be so aggravating; especially her dad—and Mr. "Deadpan" Grant Thorpe. She had not really meant that about having young Thorpe fired. But to be taken firmly by the arm and be deposited outside the bunkhouse door, and then to have the door slammed in your face — that was just a little too much!

And all because she merely insisted on knowing why he was avoiding her and would not ride to Hackamore with her any more for the mail. He wouldn't even explain. He had just said it was because he was too busy. She had said a lot of mean things to him then. But he might have known that she had not meant a word of it.

Now this! And the worst of it was that what her father had said was true! She hadn't known it herself until Grant Thorpe had taken her by the arm this morning. For a moment her heart had pounded. She had thought he was going to take her in his arms and kiss her. Even as it was, the mere grip of his arm had set her blood racing—and then she found herself dumped outside, looking at a closed door.

Jackie's head burrowed deeper into her arms, as if to hide her flushed face even from herself. So her father and the whole Bar D world knew that she was in love with Grant Thorpe! And of course that meant that Grant knew, and didn't care.

She had made a most humiliating exhibition of herself. But that was not the worst of it. The forlorn truth was the worst. Deep within her was a hurt that no tears would relieve. She was in love with a man who not only did not care, but who made it quite plain that he regarded her as a pest!

Finally she sat up and shook back her hair from her flushed face. Her long lashes veiled a certain light that had come into her eyes. Jackie Dayton was accustomed to getting what she wanted, and distinctly not accustomed to having men slam doors in her face.

Why, this was a challenge! It called for action. Who did Grant Thorpe imagine he was, anyway? Of course he was the best-looking young waddy she had ever seen, and even when he merely glanced at her in that grim, unsmiling way of his she tingled all over. And her father seemed to think he was Heaven's gift to the range, giving him complete charge of the ranch.

But even Heaven's gift might try to act human.

Jackie moved over to the rear window, from which she could get a good view of the corral and bunkhouse. She meant just to see if Grant Thorpe was still shut in the bunkhouse, biting himself. She stood back of the new curtains that had come with the dresser, a pretty little figure in snappy corded riding pants, highly polished boots, and a bright yellow silk blouse with a wide collar rolled back from a deep V at her throat. The six-gun belted at her waist, however, was a somewhat grim reminder that the Bar D was close to the turbulent Mexican border.

The bunkhouse door stood open, but Grant Thorpe, who had been hired by old Dayton while Jackie was absent on a trip to Frisco, was nowhere in sight. And then she saw that his blue roan was

gone from the corral. Only her own pony and her father's big sorrel were there now, for the outfit was camping up on the north range this week.

Thorpe must have ridden up there to look things over.

But then she caught a glimpse of him riding in quite the other direction, along the back-trail that led up to the gloomy entrance to Spider Pass, the great canyon that twisted through the depths of Thunder Mountain, its frowning crags towering over the range. A queer feeling gripped Jackie. He was riding at a hard gallop, and Spider Pass led nowhere except to the badlands of the Mexican border.

Thunder Mountain had a bad name, too.

It had always been known as a hide-out of cutthroats, rustlers, all the unsavory riffraff of the border.

Why was Grant Thorpe racing up there like that?

JACKIE grabbed up her hat and put it on. She had little chance of overtaking him, but she was going to follow him!

Mr. Grant Thorpe was going to explain about this peculiar proceeding—and about a lot of things.

Maybe he could put her out of the bunkhouse, but he could not put her off a whole mountain!

She hesitated a moment, however. Her father had absolutely forbidden her to ride into Spider Pass alone. She had ventured up there only once or twice without his knowing it—and had promptly ridden out of the pass again.

Jackie had never been a girl to be easily frightened but Thunder Mountain, she had to admit, gave her a shivery feeling.

It was so vast and lonely, wrapped in a profound, primitive silence.

But she simply had to know what Thorpe was doing up there!

She had reached the head of the stairs and was about to hurry down when she became aware of voices on the veranda. Someone must have ridden up to the house, and she had failed to hear the hoofbeats. And instantly she knew who it was. There was no mistaking that harsh, grating voice mingling with old Dayton's growl. Seth Brenner, the lean, lantern-jawed, gimlet-eyed sheriff of Hackamore, the cow-town several miles down the valley.

"You'd better be mighty sure about this, Seth!" old Bill Dayton was saying, and something in his tone made Jackie clutch at the banisters. "I'm a pretty good judge of men—and I ain't got the reputation of hirin' bandits!"

"I know it's kind of a jolt, Bill," said the sheriff, "but I reckon this is one time when your judgment slipped. His mask fell off when the driver tried to put up a fight and jumped him. Neither the bank messenger nor the driver knew him, Thorpe bein' a stranger over there same as here, but Ben Henderson, the Silver Springs sheriff, had seen him plenty of times and the description fitted. Then Ben remembered somethin'. Take a look at this picture."

THERE was a moment of tense silence. Jackie's heart seemed to stand still.

She heard her father grunt, and squirm in his chair.

"This here is a picture of Thorpe, all right," she heard him say at last. "But what does this prove?"

"Plenty!" said Brenner. "There's a cowhand over there who's a picture-takin' fool. He happened to take that picture about a month or so ago on the porch of the general store in Silver Springs. Henderson remembered it when he found that Thorpe had left the ranch on which he'd been working and disappeared. He showed the picture to the driver and the messenger, and both said right off that the feller in the picture was the one who had held 'em up and grabbed the shipment of ten thousand dollars in gold. Henderson sent copies of this here picture to all the other sheriffs round here. There's no doubt about your new foreman being the man wanted, Bill!"

CHAPTER II
Off the Trail

EVEN IN her perturbation Jackie caught the note of ill-concealed triumph and gloating in the sheriff's voice. She knew he was taking a keen relish in his present mission. The Daytons, father and daughter, were thorns in Seth Brenner's side. He had been foreman of the Bar D for a time, himself, but old Bill Dayton had caught him padding the feed and shipping bills and had fired him. His sheriff's job had come to him through certain gambling interests in Hackamore.

Brenner's dislike of Jackie dated from the day she had stopped him from beating up a helpless young Bar D cowpuncher whose only offense had been a little horseplay when he had been having a few drinks of red-eye. But with all Hackamore listening, Jackie had publicly denounced Brenner in a masterpiece of sizzling language that was still quoted all up and down the valley.

Bill Dayton and other ranchers had threatened to elect a new sheriff, and Brenner still felt none too sure of his job. Jackie knew the man's vindictive nature, too, and knew that he would not pass up an opportunity to cause trouble for the Daytons.

Now the opportunity had come to him! And he seemed sure of his ground. His smug tone showed that. He knew that her father liked Grant Thorpe, and he knew that she liked the young foreman.

Jackie flushed hotly, recalling now that Brenner had been watching her and Grant Thorpe in the general store last week, waiting for the mail stage. He had come over to them and begun asking Thorpe some pointed questions. Grant Thorpe had frowned, his gray eyes suddenly menacing, and Jackie remembered how her heart had skipped a beat. But just then the stage had come in and Brenner had turned away. But he had looked at her with a certain knowing leer in his mean eyes. And now he was coming here, gloating.

"All right, Brenner," Jackie heard her father saying. "But it seems mighty funny to me that if he got clear away with ten thousand dollars he'd just come ridin' over here and take a cowpunchin' job—not even bothering to change his name, either!"

"That's just what he would do, Bill," Brenner said, with easy assurance. "That's the way these clever hombres cover theirselves—and a lot of 'em get away with it, too. What's easier than to cache that money somewheres up in Thunder Mountain and then pose as a honest waddy lookin' for a job? He planned well—got a good record at the Circle C, where he worked till the very day before he pulled this stickup. Even had that covered—told 'em a week before that he was quittin' to go look for a foreman's job.

"Why should an honest cowhand change his name—and that's what he was makin' out to be? Why, most likely he'll claim he never even knew there was a holdup! He was always careful not to be in Silver Springs whenever the stage driver or that bank messenger was there. But he forgot about this picture, and that Ben Henderson might remember it. I'd have come out and nabbed him before he went out on the range, but—well, you see, Bill, I wouldn't arrest a Bar D man without first lettin' you know about it."

Resentment was stirring in Jackie. What the wretch really meant, flashed into her mind, was that he could not forego his moment of gloating over her father.

"I'd like to see you try it, Brenner!" she was glad to hear her father say bluntly.

A tight, grim little smile touched Jackie's lips. Perhaps her father would throw Brenner off the veranda or wring his turkey neck or something—but her world came crashing about her ears the next instant as she caught old Bill Dayton's words:

"But look here, Brenner. How about this girl in the picture with him? Yuh haven't said a word about her. Mighty nice-lookin', pretty girl, too. She seems to think Thorpe is kind of all right, the way she's lookin' up at him and smilin'—and him with his arm around her, smilin' down at her."

JACKIE'S heart felt cold, and turned over. A girl! A pretty girl—and Thorpe with his arm around her, smiling down into her eyes! So that was it! That was why he had no smiles for Jackie Dayton. That explained everything—his herding by himself, his riding off alone at night.

"The girl's of no importance in the case, Bill," she heard Brenner saying. "Just some girl working in the general store over there. I understand she fell pretty hard in love with this jasper—but she don't know anything about him. He's too smart to take women into his confidence."

A sick feeling came over Jackie, and her throat felt hot, dry. She turned blindly toward her room. She did not want to hear any more. A moment ago she had been ready to go down there and fight for Grant Thorpe, but now it did not seem to matter. Why should she? She had made spectacle enough of herself already.

"Jackie!" old Bill Dayton roared from out the corral. "Come out here pronto!"

She was sitting on the side of the bed again, trying to think, battling with emotions that were foreign to her. It was as if she had been living in a world of silly dreams for most of her eighteen years and suddenly had grown up.

But her father's roar was like a challenge. That gimlet-eyed wretch would be down there with him, gloating. They had discovered, of course, that Grant was not there, and that his horse was not in the corral. She jumped up and ran downstairs, then walked quietly out to the corral gate, where the two men were standing.

"What's the idea, Dad?" she asked, acknowledging the sheriff's presence with a slight nod. "I thought maybe the bunkhouse was on fire!"

"Where's Thorpe?" old Dayton demanded. "I told him to stay here today. I didn't hear him ride. Where did he go?"

Jackie's blue eyes widened as she looked from one man to the other.

"The movements of Mr. Grant Thorpe," she said, climbing up on the corral fence and eying the the toe of one of her shiny boots, "are not of the slightest interest to me, except that I would be very much pleased if he stayed away forever!"

"Listen here, young lady," Bill Dayton said, "you'd better stop that uppity stuff. This is serious! Thorpe is wanted for holdin' up the Silver Valley stage and robbin' it of ten thousand dollars." In a few words he then told her most of what she had overheard. From under the cover of her long lashes Jackie saw Seth Brenner eyeing her suspiciously. Angry resentment stirred in her, and a quick decision boiled up, quite without any volition on her part. She sprang down from the fence, her eyes flashing.

"A bandit—a robber!" she cried. "I tried to tell you this morning, Dad, that he was no good—and you wouldn't listen! I asked you to fire him for insulting me to my face, and you refused to do it! A nice, safe place this ranch is getting to be for a girl! And you let him ride with me! I hope this will teach you a lesson. Yes, I saw him ride. He went to join the outfit on the north range. I hope you catch him!"

"Don't you worry about that, Jackie," said Brenner, his mean eyes gleaming. "He'll be hanging from a tree before sundown! Saddle up, Bill, and we'll get after him!"

HE turned and hurried to the front of the house, where he had left his horse. Old Bill Dayton hustled into the corral to rope his own mount.

Jackie stood there, thankful that for the moment their backs were turned, that they could not see her flushed cheeks go suddenly white. They meant to hang Grant Thorpe! Hang him without a

chance to prove his innocence. She had forgotten that; forgotten that in this turbulent border country, hanging was the penalty for almost every crime, from cheating in a poker game to murder.

She had not missed that gleam in Seth Brenner's eyes. The lawman was eager for the kill, would show no mercy. And what could Thorpe say? The word of a stage driver and a bank messenger would be enough for anyone, and there was that photograph—and the word of Ben Henderson, dean of all the Southwest sheriffs.

Her father believed him guilty, too; Jackie could tell that from the way he was acting. Old man Dayton had small respect for Seth Brenner, but if Ben Henderson said black was white, Bill Dayton would believe it.

Perhaps Thorpe was guilty! Well, Jackie did not care now! She tried desperately to get control of herself, to still the beating of her heart and the turmoil in her brain. Her father and Brenner must not see, must not suspect that deliberately she had misdirected them. She loved Grant Thorpe, even though she knew about that other girl—and she could never forgive herself if she just stood by and let them hang him.

It was horrible, the very thought of it!

CHAPTER III
Love Speaks Truth

JACKIE climbed back on the fence and somehow made a fair pretense of idly kicking her heels there as Brenner came riding up and her father mounted. But the two men paid no further attention to her. They dug heels and galloped off into the trail across the open mesa that led to the north range.

But Jackie held her breath until they were well away. A new fear possessed her, a fear that Thorpe might come riding back before they left. It might have been only some simple, routine matter that had taken him up into Spider Pass.

The moment her father and Brenner were out of sight she jumped down and ran to get her saddle. She would have little time even now. The north range was only six miles away. When they did not find Thorpe there it would not take them long to figure out that he had ridden for the mountain. Brenner would lose no time in gathering a posse.

Jackie flung the saddle on her pony, yanked at the cinches, and mounted. In a few minutes she was galloping furiously up the back-trail, bent double in the saddle, a graceful figure, her bright hair whipping about her face. Not until she plunged into the gloomy depths of the great, twisting canyon and rode on into the grim fastness of the lonely mountain did it occur to her that she might not find Grant Thorpe at all!

He might have ridden down any one of the dozen hidden trails that forked off from the canyon. She had set out to find the proverbial needle in the haystack. An unwonted panic was creeping over her, a vague, confused terror of the mountain.

Glancing up at the infrequent patches of clear sky, far above the towering cliff-tops, she knew that night would be on her soon. Her panic increased, though she tried vainly to fight it down. She had come racing up here like a crazy little fool, obeying a blind urge, instead of taking time to think, which was the only sensible thing to do.

And then, as she raced around a sharp bend in the trail that ran along the side of the canyon wall, a cry caught in her throat. A rider was thundering down on her from the opposite direction—Grant Thorpe! She had a glimpse of his grim, startled face, but only a glimpse.

The two horses collided and Jackie felt her mount start to slide over the edge of the cliff. Abruptly Grant wheeled his mount around and grabbed Jackie out of the saddle. She screamed as it looked like his horse was going over the cliff—as had her own mount. But that did not happen.

"You're all right now," Grant said.

But a sudden twist of his mount made him lose his grip on her and she slid to the ground. Her head struck the hard flinty ground in a stunning blow. She did not see Grant Thorpe leap from his saddle, nor did she again feel his arms around her as he gathered her up, a half mad fear in his eyes. . . .

JACKIE stirred slightly and opened her eyes. She stared up at the ceiling, a low ceiling of rough boards. That was funny. She must still be dreaming.

She glanced around curiously. No, this was not her room. And she was lying in a bunk—and somebody had taken off her boots. It must be night, for there was a big lantern on a crazy center table. Something must have happened. This was a room in some cabin—but how on earth had she got into somebody's cabin, and whose was it?

And then her eyes came to rest on the big figure of a man standing in the open doorway with his back to her. The doorway was like a black void, with a trickle of pale moonlight showing just beyond.

Swift recollection came to Jackie. Her eyes stark with panic, even terror, she thrust aside the blanket and sprang from the bunk as the man swung around and looked at her. Grant Thorpe?

"Jackie!" he said. "I thought you were still asleep! Get back in the bunk. That was a bad tumble you had. You mustn't try to move around yet—and don't look at me like that, honey. You've nothing to fear—you're plumb safe here. Get back there and don't try to think of anything for awhile."

"You—you keep away from me!" Jackie blurted, wildly trying to keep the room from spinning round and round.

He was coming toward her! She put up her hands, or thought that was what she was doing. The room would not stop spinning, and then Grant Thorpe caught her in his arms.

Vaguely she was aware that he was talking. The feel of his arms around her was changing the whole world; and his hand was caressing her soft, shining hair. She looked up at him and her heart gave a great bound as she saw in his eyes what she had so longed to see there.

"You're still light-headed from the awful shakin' up you got, honey," he was saying jerkily. "You must have saddled up in such a hurry that you forgot to tighten the cinches."

His arms tightened around her and he gathered her close. Then his lips crushed hers in a kiss that set her blood aflame. Her arms crept up around his neck, her own warm lips answering his. For a long moment time was blotted out as a wild, sweet happiness thrilled her. But then he thrust her from his arms almost roughly. Jackie stared at him, her warm, moist lips parted. "Grant!" she half whispered. "Oh, Grant!"

"I'm sorry, Jackie," he said thickly, his face set in grim lines again. "I shouldn't have done that."

"Why not?" Jackie threw back her head so that he could see her heart clear in her eyes. "Why should you be sorry, Grant? Do you mean that—that it meant just nothing to you?"

Jackie stopped—because again he took her in his arms, but now he was looking down at her with a gay, reckless, boyish grin. Jackie's heart thumped. She had reached him at last! Reached the man who had tried to hide behind that morose, dead-pan mask!

"I thought I could hold out, Jackie," he said, his voice, his whole manner suddenly vibrant, alive. He lifted her face in his hand and smiled down at her. "I've loved you from the minute I first saw you. I wanted to take you in my arms like this, and I darn near did this morning when you came into the bunkhouse, like the sweet, lovely kid you are, and tried to get a decent human reaction out of me."

"But why didn't you?" asked Jackie, her eyes shining.

"Because I wanted to get all straightened out and have a future of some kind mapped out before I asked yuh to marry me."

"Stuff," said Jackie. "I knew it was some awful noble thing like that. Several times I've come near shaking you, Grant Thorpe!"

"But it wasn't only that, honey," he said, his face grim again. "There's somethin' else—and you better get ready for a shock. Something mighty bad happened over in Silver Valley. In a word—I'm wanted for holding up the Silver Springs stage and robbing it of a bank shipment of ten thousand dollars!"

"Oh, Grant!" Jackie exclaimed, springing from his arms and looking at him with eyes suddenly stark. "I know! I must be crazy to have forgotten! Tell me quick! Where are we? There may not be a moment to lose!"

"Hold on!" The big waddy stopped her, staring at her. "What are you saying, Jackie? Do you know?"

"Yes!" Jackie was clutching his arm, looking up at him with fear for him in her lovely eyes. "That's what brought me riding up into Spider Pass—hoping to find you and warn you! That low wretch Seth Brenner came to the house to—to arrest you!"

THE words fairly tumbled from her trembling lips as she told him. In her excitement she did not notice that he listened with an odd flicker in his eyes.

"You'll have to get over the border, Grant dear!" she finished. "It's the only way! Oh, Grant, they'll hang you if they catch you! I'll ride with you!"

"You don't think I did it, do you, Jackie?" he asked, looking at her with that odd flicker again in his eyes.

"Of course not!" said Jackie, blinking at him. "Though I wouldn't care if you had—not now. But don't stand there looking at me! We've got to do something, Grant! I asked you about this cabin?"

"It's well hid in the mountain, Jackie," he said. "There's no wild rush. It'll take a lot of searching to find this place, especially at night. I found this shack and fixed it up as a hideout when I got wind that somebody was tryin' to fasten that hold-up business on me. I didn't want to hide, but common sense told me it would be best for a while. I'd have time to get the mess cleared up."

"Did you see Brenner coming this morning?" asked Jackie. "You were riding up here at a pretty reckless pace."

"No, I didn't see him," the waddy told her. "I was in a hurry to get up here, though, and I'll tell you why. I got a good pard over at the Silver Valley ranch where I worked, a young cowpuncher named Bart Williams. When I had to pull stakes, Bart's been investigating this hold-up for me. This mornin' he signaled from the cliff top that you can see plain from the Bar D home range. He had news and wanted me pronto. To make it short, honey, Bart and I have been watchin' Olsen, the stage driver. His record, we found, isn't clear. This mornin' we decided to get a little rough with Olsen. So Bart is goin' to bring him here tonight for a little talkin' to. It's just a gamble that anything will come of it, but now, with Brenner hot on my trail, it looks as if it's worth it."

Jackie sat down on the edge of the bunk. She felt quite calm now, and her brain was working fast. The dull ache in her head and the dizziness had left her. It was as if the miracle of love had restored both her strength and her wits. She sat rubbing her hands together, looking absently at her stockinged toes. With her shapely figure and her bright hair tumbling about her face, Jackie looked for the moment like some lovely child.

She was not, however, indulging in childish thoughts.

"There's another pony with my roan," said Grant Thorpe, lighting a cigarette. "Bart and Olsen should be here soon now. Meantime, I'm going to make yuh some hot coffee."

"I don't need it, Grant," said Jackie. "I'm all right now."

She got up and got her boots, sitting on the floor to yank them on. Then she went back to the bunk and sat there. Her hand played over the butt of the six-gun

at her belt. A strange light came into her eyes. If things went wrong, if something terrible happened, she knew what she would do.

She would kill Seth Brenner.

The waddy's hand touched her cheek, caressed it.

She looked up with a start to find him gazing down into her eyes with a grave, tender light in his own.

"I haven't said anything yet, honey," he said, his voice a bit unsteady, "about how brave you was to come ridin' up into the mountain, and what you done down there at the ranch. I shouldnt' let you stay here."

JACKIE jumped up and stood smiling at him.

"Don't be a big silly!" she chided. "And if you think you're going to get rid of me, Mister, you'd better start thinking of something more interesting right away! Listen, Grant! That name, Olsen, sounds vaguely familiar, but I just can't place it. Do you mean you suspect the driver was in with the real robber, and that they are trying to make you the victim?"

"Somethin' like that," the waddy told her, with a wry grin. "Pickin' me was a shrewd move. You see, honey, before I took that job over there I was workin' for three years all over Mexico. I'd lost all my contacts up here, and—"

He broke off as a peculiar whistle reached his ears.

"That's Bart!" he said quickly. "Perhaps you better not be seen, Jackie. If we have to let Olsen go, he'll talk plenty."

"I've already been accused of chasing you all over Rimrock Valley," said Jackie, with a little smile. "I'm staying right here."

Her hat was lying on the table. She picked it up and yanked it on, then stood back in the room as the waddy gave an answering whistle.

"The only way to get in here is through a narrow tunnel," he said, stepping to the door. "Too narrow for a horse. They're comin' on foot."

CHAPTER IV
Cabin Roundup

AS HE spoke two men stepped into the lighted room—and Jackie did not have to be told which was which. The first man had his wrists bound in front of him. He was short and stocky, with a pasty-white face and insolent, sneering, heavy-lidded eyes. Olsen, of course.

The man behind him, prodding him in the back with a six-gun, was a tall, sandy-haired youth with pleasant brown eyes; though they were not exactly pleasant at the moment.

Olsen did not see Jackie at first. His angry eyes were on Grant Thorpe.

"You'll hang double for this, Thorpe!" he grated. "And so will this precious pardner of yours! If you reckon you can poke off your dirty work on me—"

"Shut up and sit down over there on that bunk!" snapped the young cowboy. "One funny move out of you and I'll knock you cold—if I don't decide to kill you!"

He did not finish. Olsen suddenly had become aware of Jackie Dayton. His lips went as white as the rest of his face.

"Grant!" Jackie cried. "I thought I knew the name! Why, I know this man! Until a year ago he was Seth Brenner's chief deputy. The pair of them were as thick as thieves!"

"So what about it?" Olsen challenged insolently. His eyes were darting about the room nervously. "Say, what kind of funny business is this, anyway? Listen, Jackie Dayton—I don't know what you're doing here, but if you've let these lobos get hold of you and talk you into something, you better get wise to yourself! Come to think of it, I'm glad you are here! I call you to witness I've been dragged off my stage, bound, and brought up here at the point of a gun!"

If Olsen meant to say anything more, the rest of his words were lost in the roar of a gun from out in front of the

cabin. A wild cry tore from Jackie's throat as she saw Grant Thorpe spin around with a queer look of surprise on his face, then stumble and crash to the floor. She had a glimpse of Olsen suddenly turning on the young cowhand like a vicious animal, striking him in the face, with his bound hands, smashing him down. And then a man came leaping in through the doorway with a smoking gun in his hand—Seth Brenner, the sheriff!

For an instant Jackie stood there, dazed, petrified with horror. But then she saw the wicked gleam in Brenner's little eyes. Thorpe was getting to his feet, his gun in his hand—but he was going to be too late! The sheriff had meant to kill him with that first shot, and certainly was going to finish him now, without mercy! And Thorpe's young waddy friend was desperately struggling with Olsen, and unable to help.

Something snapped in Jackie's brain. If Brenner had noted her presence at all he had given no sign. Jackie did not move. But her six-gun came into her hand seemingly of its own volition. She scarcely was aware of pressing the trigger.

The thunderous roar of the weapon in the small room deafened her, but through the swirl of acrid smoke she saw Brenner jerk upright, then reel back against the front wall of the cabin and sink to the floor. She stood there trembling, still holding the gun clutched tight in her hand.

Then she saw Grant Thorpe on his feet, with a spreading stain on his left shoulder. She felt sick, and there was something she ought to think of—but could not. It didn't matter, because Grant was all right. He was bending over Seth Brenner, taking guns away from him.

The next minute he was standing up. The man Olsen was groaning in the bunk into which Grant Thorpe's friend Bart had dumped him. Olsen's pasty face was battered and bleeding.

Grant Thorpe was coming toward Jackie, taking her by the arm. He was sitting her down in a chair. He was holding a tin cup to her lips, and some fiery stuff was in it. Didn't he know that she could not drink that? But she was—and it was doing something to her, bringing a warm surge of life back to her.

SUDDENLY Jackie got to her feet, clutched at Thorpe. She dared not look at Brenner. Not that she cared. She would do it again. He was going to kill Grant Thorpe in cold blood.

"It's all right, honey," said the waddy thickly. "And you're goin' to be all right in a minute. You didn't kill him. Caught him in the side, but he'll live. I reckon I owe you my life—but I already owe all of that to you, Jackie! That coyote only nicked me, but it sure knocked me for a minute."

"So you're in with this pair of lobo bandits, Jackie Dayton!"

They whirled around. Brenner was propped on an elbow, his eyes jeering.

"Nice news for the high-an'-mighty Bill Dayton!" he snarled. "I reckon I got here just in time to save you from bein' shot, Olsen. Seems they stop at nothing. Guess I give you a little surprise, Thorpe—but there's mighty few hideouts in this mountain I don't know about. My posse'll be here in a few minutes. You can't get away, Thorpe, so you might as well surrender."

"Grant!" Jackie cried, her heart in her throat. "That might be true. Mount and ride at once! Get over the border!"

"It's only a tall bluff, honey," said Thorpe, a hard grin on his face. "Here's somethin' that maybe'll make you change your tune, Brenner. Tom Clarke, that bank messenger, broke down up in Cactus the other day and spilled the works. The news was kept quiet while some checking up was done. Every cent of the money was found where he said Olsen and he hid it in Chalk Canyon. I was going to bring Olsen to Hackamore and have him face you, Brenner, but you saved me the trouble by running your

head into your own noose. Guess you stood outside there listenin' for a few minutes when you saw I had company—and you had a hunch the best thing to do would be to put me out of the way by killing me pronto!"

"It's a lie!" Brenner snarled. "Don't believe it, Olsen!"

"You come clean, Olsen," said Thorpe, "and Ben Henderson will see that you get off easy. There wasn't no hold-up at all, was there?"

The man gave Thorpe a keen, searching glance. Then he gave a shrug.

"Of course not!" he said. "You win, Thorpe."

"Shut up, you fool!" Brenner snarled desperately. "Can't you see you're bein' led into a slick trap?"

"You can fool yourself if you want to, Brenner," said Olsen, "but I know when I'm caught. And I don't intend to hang just to save your precious neck. I told you Clarke was no good. And I warned you that some jasper workin' under cover was hot on our trail. You wouldn't listen—and now look! That jasper was Thorpe himself—the man you picked to take the blame. And you told me he was just a dumb cowhand!"

"It was Brenner got you the job of driver, wasn't it?" Thorpe then questioned.

"Yes," said Olsen. "You can prove that easy enough."

"If I could get my hands on a gun, Olsen," said Brenner, his little eyes glittering, "I'd kill you!"

"I reckon your killin' days are over!" said Olsen. "This isn't the first mess you've made of things. If I'd follered my hunch and hightailed over the border with my share of the dinero I wouldn't be in any mess now!" He turned to Thorpe. "It was easy, Grant. Clarke and I just pulled up in a lonely spot in Chalk Canyon, hid the money, then galloped the stage into town, yellin' we'd been stuck up."

SHERIFF Seth Brenner was unconscious now, breathing heavily, as Olsen finished his confession from the bunk. Jackie still could not look. She was on the other side of the cabin, staring through the window into the dark.

"We must get both of them down to the Bar D at once, Grant," the girl said, without turning around. "And I must dress your injured arm."

"We'll all get moving," said Thorpe. "Your dad will be mighty near crazy by this time. I think I hear the hoofs of a search party comin' through the pass this minute. . . ."

Hours later Jackie and Grant Thorpe sat on the veranda steps, side by side. The turmoil of the night had subsided, and they were alone. Her thick lashes veiled Jackie's eyes.

"But you haven't answered my question yet," she said. "About that girl in the picture with you. You did have your arm around her. I got the picture out of Brenner's pocket and saw. Did you—did you ever kiss her? Like you kissed me up there in the cabin?"

"For Pete's sake, are you going to start that all over again?" groaned Thorpe. "Haven't I told you there was nothing whatever between us—that she's just a mighty nice girl? No, I never kissed her at all!"

"Oh," said Jackie, her lashes concealing the twinkle in her eye.

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The Ivory Kid, piano-playing gunswift, rides the long trail home to write a funeral dirge for a scheming killer!

A Novelet of the Rangeland by CHUCK MARTIN

CHAPTER I

A Gunswift Comes Home

THE IVORY KID felt at home for the first time in more than five years when he rode into the little Border town of Texico with the old "Professor." Texico was in Texas, near the Border, and sprawled just across the International Line was the Mexican colony of Oldtown. Most of the Border law was carried in low-slung holsters around that area.

"You wait here outside the Oasis, Kid," the stoop-shouldered Professor grunted carelessly at the tall cowboy riding a black Morgan stallion. "I'll go inside and make some inquiries. Fat Nelson might need a hand to tickle the ivories."

The Ivory Kid nodded gravely and swung from his ornately carved saddle to tie the stud at the hitch-rail. The sober expression made his bronzed face look five years older than his age. The twin ivory-butted six-guns in his well-oiled holsters weren't used only for ornamental purposes. The Kid was only twenty, but his bleak blue eyes had looked upon a lot of life, and had found most of it unsavory.

"You can find out on one drink," the Kid said curtly. "You'll slip your jaw-bridle if you take more than that."

He sighed when the old musician shouldered his way through the swinging doors of the saloon.

The Professor had escaped death many times because he went around unarmed. The Ivory Kid managed to escape just that many times because he carried two .45s on his hips. But he was becoming weary of gunsmoke and the long trails between towns where they seldom stayed for long.

The Ivory Kid's lips curled back in a snarl when he thought of the brand he had worn from Montana to the Mexican border. "Gunswift," they called him, and most of the time it had been caused by the Professor's love for liquor and his habit of talking too much when he was in his cups. He smiled then, and the hard features of his face relaxed.

"We ought to get some peace, now that we're home again," he muttered under his breath. Suddenly he straightened when a girl stepped jauntily from the general store.

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"Molly!" he cried, as she brushed her fingers across his lips

She was dressed neatly in a gray woolen shirt and soft buckskin riding trousers. Polished high-heeled boots twinkled on the board sidewalk, and the Kid narrowed his eyes when he saw the light calibered six-gun that was belted high on her slim right hip. He forgot his manners and stared, until the girl raised dark eyes that were almost black and reproved him with a shake of her head.

The Ivory Kid flushed a little and turned his eyes aside. Then he stared again. The girl was helping a white-haired cattleman, whose stumbling feet betrayed his affliction. The loosely dangling right arm confirmed the Kid's suspicions, and his blue eyes expressed the sympathy that made him lower his gaze.

More than once he had seen men partially paralyzed. Sometimes a bullet had been responsible, or perhaps a bad bucker had trompled a luckless cowboy who had stayed too long at his trade. The Kid gasped when a trick of memory suddenly brought him the identity of the crippled oldster.

"Speedy McShane!" he called hoarsely, and stepped forward with outstretched hand.

SLOWLY, the old cattleman came to a halt and raised his silvery head. His gray eyes focused on the Kid's face.

The girl at his side set her lips hard and faced the cowboy. There was a little glint of anger shimmering in her dark eyes.

"The name is Dennis McShane," she said tartly. "And what is yours, stranger?"

The Kid flushed. A big man in flashy attire stepped from the saloon before he could answer, and again the Kid's memory worked swiftly when the stranger stepped up behind McShane and tapped him on the shoulder.

"A word with you, McShane," he said in a hard, low voice. "It's about your paper."

Dennis McShane's lips grew tight under his close-clipped, white mustache. His right shoulder twitched spasmodically, but the muscles refused to obey the command of his gun-fighting brain.

"This is hardly the time or place to gun a man for a gambling debt, Duke Coulter," the old cattleman said in a soft voice. "I'll pay you off after beef roundup."

"Please, Mr. Coulter," the girl pleaded. "Dad has just been to see the doctor, and he does not feel well. . . . I'll take you home now, Dad."

"Just a minute, Molly." The big man chuckled and laid his hand on her arm. "You could make it easier for the old man."

Molly McShane pulled free of Coulter's grasp and slapped down for the gun at her hip. "Duke" Coulter stepped in quickly and caught her right hand while his left arm went around her waist and drew her close to his handsomely embroidered vest.

The Ivory Kid acted without thinking. His left hand shot out and pressed down with all his strength on the gambler's right hand until Coulter had to release the girl. Then the Kid hooked a right uppercut to the smooth-shaven jaw.

Duke Coulter, just over six feet, and weighing a hundred and ninety pounds, went sprawling back on the boardwalk and rolled swiftly to his knees. Both long-fingered hands snaked down to the pair of blue-barreled guns on his legs. But his movements were thwarted when the tall cowboy crouched low and came up with both hands full.

"Start smoking if you draw, gambling man," the Ivory Kid warned softly. "I know who and what you are!"

The bulky gambler came to his feet, both hands raised shoulder-high. He stared menacingly at the cowboy until the doors of the saloon swished open and the Professor came out on the walk. Then Duke Coulter nodded slowly.

"I know you now, you sneaking gunswift!" he growled. "You're Jordan Bennett's son. You've growed some since you and the Professor left Texico some

years ago."

The Ivory Kid stared for a minute and then he spread his brown hands sideways to holster the heavy .45s. He bunched his broad shoulders, and his deep voice vibrated like a steel blade quivering in hard wood.

"You called the last hand a sneak, gambling man," he taunted. "Now, it's your deal!"

The tall cowboy was watching the big gambler carefully, but he could see "Speedy" McShane in front of him, just off to the side. The old cattleman was swaying from side to side, his lips twisting angrily under the white mustache.

"Jordan Bennett's boy," the Kid taunted the gambler. "What are you waiting for, Coulter?"

The gambler braced himself when he heard a click behind the swinging doors. Hearing Molly McShane gasp, the Ivory Kid turned his head slightly. Then his lips curled at the corners when he saw a wide-shouldered gunman grinning coldly at him above the cocked hammers of a sawed-off shotgun.

"Drop them hoglegs, Kid," the gambler murmured softly. "Trigger Farrel never misses, and that old riot gun runs nine shots to the barrel!"

"Don't you move, Coulter," the Ivory Kid warned. "You're right in line with me if he touches off that murder gun, and I'm digging for leather the minute you take a step!"

DUKE COULTER glanced over his shoulder and shuddered when he saw the gaping muzzles of the sawed-off.

"No dice, Trigger," he drawled. "Lower them hammers easy and step on back inside. I can handle this yearling."

The Ivory Kid smiled grimly when "Trigger" Farrel opened his mouth to protest, then cursed softly under his breath when he obeyed the gambler. The doors opened on the rebound when a tall, swarthy man of thirty-five stepped through, and Speedy McShane growled a low warning.

"That's Hub Halloway, Kid. He packs a spare under his left arm!"

Duke Coulter frowned with anger and jerked his head to keep the lean gunman back. Then he moistened his lips and grinned evilly while he locked glances with the Ivory Kid.

"You win the deal for now, cowboy," he said evenly. "I've seen those guns of yours before, but you ain't near the man old Jordan Bennett was. I'm warning you to clear out of Texico and not to cut my sign again!"

With the speed that marked all his movements, the big gambler whirled on his heel and started for the saloon. The Ivory Kid stopped the downthrust of his hands toward his twin holsters when Duke Coulter presented his back. "Hub" Halloway watched him closely, then he also turned and followed his boss into the Oasis Saloon.

The Ivory Kid stared until a small hand gripped his arm and drew him into the shadow of the board awning above the general store. The Professor was at his side before he could protest, and the cowboy bit his lower lip and waited for the old musician to speak.

"You a gunswift!" the Professor sneered. "I train you for five years, and you let that gun-toting gambler talk his way out of his needings!"

Molly McShane, after helping her father into a buckboard, turned to find the tall cowboy staring at the Professor.

"I want to talk to you, Jordan Bennet," she said quietly, but there was a peculiar look in her dark eyes. "Dad and I will be waiting for you at the ford down by the river."

She started her lively team and clattered up the street before the Ivory Kid could frame an answer. Without a word to the Professor, he walked to the hitch-rail and pulled the slip-knot in his hair rope. Then he vaulted lightly to the saddle and sent the Morgan stallion roaring after the buckboard.

Rio Blanco was the only river near the little cattle town, and he saw the buckboard shower spray when Molly McShane crossed the rocky ford. The

girl reined in under a cottonwood tree when she heard the thunder of horse's hoofs. The Ivory Kid made the crossing and eased back in his carved saddle, a question in his blue eyes.

"Do you remember my father?" she began hesitantly, and then corrected herself. "But you spoke to him back there in Texico," she murmured. "He and your father were old friends."

"I remember," the Ivory Kid grunted. "Everybody called him 'Speedy' McShane when I lived on the J Bar B with my dad!"

"I was the town marshal up to a year ago," the crippled oldster grumbled bitterly. "Then I resigned to rod my Circle-M spread."

"Begging your pardon, Speedy," the cowboy murmured, his eyes fastened on the ground. "Maybe a bronc got you down and trampled you."

"Duke Coulter crippled Dad," Molly accused. "He shot him through the right shoulder and the bullet severed a nerve or something. He's been partly paralyzed ever since."

The Ivory Kid glanced at the old cattleman and gently rubbed the grips of his guns. "I'm looking for a riding job," he said quietly. "The Professor will get a job in town pounding the ivories, like always."

"We're short of hands," McShane said, without raising his voice. "Will seventy-five a month suit you, and does it tell you the story?"

The Ivory Kid nodded slowly. "That's fighting pay," he answered somberly. "The kind I've been drawing for the past three years, since I took on my growth. You've hired a hand, Speedy McShane."

He turned to watch the effect of his words on Molly. The girl's cheeks were flushed and her eyes were shining brightly when she stretched out a hand. Her fingers gripped him with a strength he would not have suspected in her girlish body.

"Okay, pard," she said with a husky note in her throaty voice. "Now we might have a chance to beat Duke Coulter!"

CHAPTER II
Two Kinds Of Music

LATER, the Ivory Kid tied his horse to the hitch-rail in front of the long, rambling ranchhouse on the Circle M. Molly drove her team to the barn, leaving her father on the broad gallery. But old Dennis McShane walked unassisted into the big living room.

"Come in, Kid," he called over his shoulder. "I'll explain the layout before you start working for Molly and me."

The Ivory Kid followed McShane inside and his walk was stiff-legged and quick. Dennis McShane watched him, and nodded with a little frown of understanding.

"You've slept on the ground a lot, and you've learned to watch for sudden danger," he remarked quietly. "I reckon you know it makes you a marked man, wearing two guns that way."

"I never thought about it," the Kid answered soberly. "The Professor hung 'em on me the day dad was buried, and for two years I didn't do anything but practice."

His eyes traveled to an old grand piano, and McShane was curious when the cowboy stripped off his skin gloves and began to rub his long fingers. A change suddenly came over him as he walked across the room and ran his fingers lightly over the yellowed keys.

"The Ivory Kid," McShane muttered. "How come you to get that name, cowboy?"

"It was the Professor's doings," the Kid answered slowly. "We lit down in a little town over in Arizona when we left here. The Professor taught me the scales and insisted that I practice them every day."

"Your father played when he wanted to limber up his fingers," McShane

answered, nodding his silvery head. "Many's the time I've heard him play something he called the third movement of the 'Moonlight Sonata,' and it was always just before he started a man-hunt. He claimed it taught him how to use both hands."

The Kid shrugged and sat down on the piano stool facing McShane. "You spoke about rustling," he suggested quietly. "You got any suspicions?"

"I sat in a poker game about a year ago," the old cattleman answered thoughtfully. "I figured Duke Coulter was running a bluff, and then I saw him rub a card from the bottom of the deck when he dealt for the draw."

McShane raised his left hand slowly and gently rubbed his right shoulder.

"I called the play from behind a six-gun," the old cattleman went on gruffly. "But Trigger Farrel slipped that sawed-off down from under his coat and made me holster my gun."

The Ivory Kid leaned forward with his nostrils flaring wide. "But Coulter mentioned a paper," he murmured.

"I was in to him for five thousand," McShane explained harshly. "But that last hand would have cleaned the slate. I had kings full, and had discarded an ace. That was the card Duke Coulter raised from the bottom!"

"The cheating sidewinder," the Kid whispered. "I'd have let him have it right then!"

McShane nodded hard. "He beat me to it," he admitted under his breath. "He made his spread of four aces, and swept on down for his gun without stopping his hand. I've been crippled like this ever since."

"It don't stack up with what my dad told me about you," the Kid murmured. "He claimed you was the fastest gun-slick on the Border."

"Except one," McShane corrected. "And Duke Coulter beat that fellow to the gun, just like he beat me."

The Kid narrowed his eyes and watched the muscles working in McShane's thin face. The ivory handles of his twin guns gleamed in the shadowed room to match the color of the keyboard on the old piano.

"This other feller you mentioned?"

"Jordan Bennett—your dad," McShane answered, without hesitation. "He was the only man I ever saw that could shoot with either hand and put them where he called them. He claimed he learned how from playing that piece of music."

The Ivory Kid smiled wryly. "The Professor made me learn the third movement, and he likewise made me learn what it meant," he explained. "The Professor knows book learning."

"What does it mean?" McShane said.

"It's book talk," the Kid grunted. "A sonata is an extended composition for one or two instruments, having three or four movements which are contrasted in rhythm, but written in related keys."

"I learned to read from making brands on cattle," McShane sneered, and turned his head when Molly came in from the porch. "I can't make head or tail out of such lingo."

"Perhaps I can explain, Dad," the girl said, sitting down beside the Ivory Kid on the bench. "Most of the time you play the melody with the right hand, while the left hand plays the full chords in a different tempo."

"That's the way the Professor explained it," the Ivory Kid agreed, nodding. "He claimed that most two-gun men could only shoot with one hand, or if they used two guns they had to draw and fire them at the same time."

MCSHANE was staring at his daughter's hands, trying to understand something that was like a foreign language to him.

"Any two-gun toter draws and triggers both guns at the same time, or else he chops his shots one right after the other," McShane argued stubbornly. "Duke Coulter is that kind, and he never learned to tickle the ivories."

"I can use my left hand alone, and use it as good as my right," the Ivory

Kid said persistently. "The Professor made me practice for two years after we left here. He pounded my knuckles with a ruler when I made a mistake, but now I can see what he was trying to do."

"He was trying to make a sissy out of you," McShane growled. Then he leaned forward and stabbed at the Kid with his left forefinger. "Did you ever hear how come your daddy to get killed?" he asked bluntly.

"I'd like to know," the Ivory Kid whispered through dry lips.

"He was sitting in a card game," McShane began, and Molly shuddered at the venom in his deep voice. "He stood to win ten thousand dollars, or lose his J-Bar-B spread. I reckon you know he lost it."

"Yeah," the Kid murmured. "That's why the Professor took me away."

Molly McShane pressed his hand on the keys close to her own. The old cattleman stared for a moment, and then his eyes grew hard and brittle with the bitterness of memory.

"Jordan accused this gambler of cheating," he continued, in a low, harsh voice. "Then he went for his right-hand gun, but a gent by the name of Hub Halloway jammed his hand and cut off his draw. Halloway was sitting right alongside your dad, and his partner cut loose with both guns before old Jordan could draw his other gun!"

The Ivory Kid stiffened. "Hub Halloway's partner?" he asked. "Was it—Duke Coulter?"

McShane slowly nodded his silvery head. Molly came to her feet suddenly and walked across the room, where she took a seat in a low chair. Then the Ivory Kid squared his shoulders and closed his eyes, facing the old piano.

His brown hands raised above the yellowed ivory keys and were poised there for a moment. Then the tall cowboy dropped his hands with a resounding crash.

A vibrant melody filled the long room, then the left hand fell slowly and filled in the bass with a slow, thumping beat, to give the impression of massive rocks with spray dashing against them in the moonlight.

The old cattleman watched those long-fingered hands rise and fall and the movements were not in unison, each independent of the other, but blending together in a way that brought a soothing sense of security and peace to jangled nerves.

Deep in thought, neither of the two men heard the heavy footfall on the front porch when a tall, lanky man stepped into the room. The Ivory Kid happened to glance at Molly McShane, and his eyes widened when he saw her staring toward the door.

"Just keep both them hands on the ivories, cowboy!" a harsh voice warned. "Duke sent me out on this job."

The Ivory Kid turned his head slowly and stared at the grinning face of Hub Halloway. His hands rippled slowly over the keys and he smiled when he saw the smirking killer gripping the handle of his gun.

"I heard you wiseing the Kid up, McShane," the gunman growled at the cattleman. "Now he knows too much for his health!"

The Ivory Kid went right on playing his sonata. He knew that Hub Halloway could rip out his gun and squeeze off a center shot before he could rise to his feet. His brown hands floated over the keys slowly, picking the bass chords sharply while the melody ran lightly up and down the higher notes.

"Yeah, I know," he said to Halloway, without raising his voice. "You jammed my dad's gun on a sneak play, while your partner made his double pass and triggered two slugs through his head!"

HUB HALLOWAY half drew his gun and crouched forward on the balls of his feet. "And you just had to come back home," he sneered. "Duke said there was a place for you beside your dad, up there on Boot Hill!"

The Ivory Kid increased the tempo of

his playing. The fingers of his right hand flashed across the keys like beams of dazzling light. His left hand struck a crashing chord and slid slowly from the keyboard. Then he stabbed for the gun on his left leg without stopping the movements of his right hand.

Hub Halloway was watching him with the cruel confidence of a cat that has cornered a field mouse. His gun started from the holster when he saw the Kid's left hand slash down. A deafening roar drowned out the crash of the bass chords when a gun tilted up in the Ivory Kid's left hand. Orange flame tipped the muzzle and was snuffed out by black powder smoke.

Hub Halloway fired a slug into the floor before he slumped down, a blue hole between his eyes.

Speedy McShane gasped and stared at the lifeless killer on the floor by the front door. Then he swung his head slowly, and a hard little smile curled his lips under the snowy mustache.

The Ivory Kid had caught his bucking hammer for a second shot that would not be needed. The fingers of his right hand were still flowing over the aged ivory keys. Then he holstered his smoking weapon and brought his left hand down to close the sonata with a crashing chord of triumph.

Molly McShane sat stiffly in her chair, and her left hand was clutching her heart to still its tumult. Her well-rounded bosom was rising and falling with a startled excitement that numbed her senses for the time. Then she came slowly to her feet and ran across the room to put her arms around the tall cowboy at the piano.

"He came to kill you," she sobbed. "And he would have killed Dad and me to keep us from telling what we saw!"

The Ivory Kid nodded, while a flush spread across his face to the line of his dark hair. It was the first time a woman had ever held him like that, and he was afraid to move lest the spell be broken.

"I had it to do," he said huskily. "The Professor said the play would come something like this."

Old Speedy McShane arose from his chair and extended his hand—his right hand.

"The doctor was right," he said in a vibrant voice. "He said something would release the pressure that was holding back my muscles. Grip me hard, son!"

CHAPTER III
The Living And The Dead

FEELING steely fingers clamp down on his right hand, the Kid lowered his head to make sure, and then he smiled when he saw the old man's right hand gripping his own.

"I thought that arm was crippled," the kid said, puzzled. "You didn't have any use of it at all when Hub Halloway first stepped in."

Molly McShane leaned on his shoulder and began to sob with happiness. The old cattleman swallowed hard and turned his back, while he slowly tested the muscles of his arm. Then he turned back to the cowboy.

"Doc Murphy has been working on that arm, Kid," he explained, excitement flooding his voice. "Last month he fished for the slug, and got it. Then he said something was pressing on the nerve, and that it might turn loose if I got excited enough to forget that I've been crippled all this time!"

The Ivory Kid sighed when Molly wiped her eyes and stepped away from him. Then his eyes traveled to the dead gunman on the floor. He jerked his head at McShane and started for the door.

"I don't dig any holes for varmints like him," he growled. "Let's tie him on his horse and send the critter back to Texico town."

Hub Halloway was limp enough to strap to the seat of his saddle. The Ivory Kid laid the body face-down, and tied ankles and wrists together tightly. Then

he removed the bridle and slapped the mount with his hat, and the two men watched the animal race across the yard and start for town.

"Now, tell me about this rustling I was hired to help you put down," the Kid said.

McShane tugged on his mustache thoughtfully. "The Circle-M herds are growing smaller, while the J-Bar-B outfit is getting fat," he said slowly. "Help me stop the rustling and I'll make you a partner in the Circle M."

"The J-Bar-B was my Dad's outfit," the kid snapped thinly. "Who's running the old iron now?"

"You didn't know that Duke Coulter took it over after you left town with the Professor?" McShane asked sharply.

The tall cowboy snarled angrily. "That spread belongs to me. And I mean to get it back!"

Speedy McShane sighed and shook his head.

"I'm afraid you won't, Kid," he said slowly. "Coulter has a pack of gunslicks working on the ranch, killers from both sides of the Line. He's the big boss in Texico, and right now he's trying to get Trigger Farrel elected as sheriff. Pat Milton, the last sheriff, was picked up on the south bank of the Rio Blanco with a slug between his shoulders. He was sheriff after your daddy quit to rod the J-Bar-B. We haven't had much law since then."

"I better feed my hoss," the cowboy said, after a pause. "I think I'll take a little ride in the moonlight tonight."

He led the large black stallion to a box stall in the barn and fed the big horse a double ration of grain. Then he piled the manger high with sweet blue-stem and returned to the ranchhouse. McShane was standing just inside the front room, and he smiled coldly when the cowboy stared at the long black gun thonged low on his right leg.

"Watch!" the old cattleman said.

HIS SILVERY head was well back, eyes half closed. His right hand slapped down suddenly to thwack against the worn walnut handle. His thumb slipped on the smooth hammer, and the Kid turned his head when a flush of embarrassment mantled the oldster's thin face.

"You'll get the feel of it right soon," the Ivory Kid encouraged, smiling. "The old speed will come back again with practice."

Hearing a horse trot into the yard, both men started quickly for the door. The Kid grunted when he recognized the old musician.

"Light down, Professor," McShane invited heartily. "You're just in time for grub. Molly will be beating on the dishpan before you and the Kid get washed up."

The Professor nodded his acceptance as he swung to the ground. He came close and stared at the smoke-grimed gun on the Ivory Kid's left leg.

"Music?" he asked softly, but with a hard smile playing on his lips. "You've been playing for the folks?"

The Ivory Kid stared sullenly, remained silent.

"You never was much on the talk," the Professor murmured. "I saw Hub Halloway's horse making tracks for Texico town."

"Yeah, I did it," the cowboy said harshly. "He bragged that Duke Coulter sent him out here to do a job. He had me cold, but I was playing the third movement of the Moonlight Sonata!"

"Boot Hill Sonata," the Professor corrected gravely.

"You never told me it was Duke Coulter who killed my Dad," the Kid accused harshly. "You kept me practicing for years with two guns, when I wasn't pounding the keys on some old brokendown piano!"

"He'd have killed you," the Professor answered quietly. "You needed seasoning, and I made you plenty of trouble until I was sure you were fit. Then we started back home."

"Home?" the Kid echoed bitterly. "With Duke Coulter and his killing mob

of rustlers holding down the J Bar B?"

"And making money for you," the old musician answered with a nod. "That's what I rode out here to talk about. They're planning a raid on the Circle M tonight."

Speedy McShane stepped up with a low growl. "How did you find out about that?" he demanded gruffly, and his right hand called attention to the gun on his leg.

The Professor stared at the old weapon and then offered his hand. "I was talking to Doc Murphy," he told the old cattleman. "He said you'd be packing an iron soon."

McShane shook hands and stared at the old musician. "About this raid?" he prompted.

"I got a job tickling the ivories in a cantina over in Oldtown," the Professor explained. "Two Mex vaqueros were talking at a table right close. They didn't know I could savvy their tongue, so I played a Spanish love song and tuned in my ear."

"Go on, Professor," McShane urged. "Who were those hombres?"

"Ramon Gomez is a tall buckaroo with a little black mustache," the Professor explained. "His partner was a bow-legged Mex by the name of Chacon. Know them?"

"Chacon is ramrod for Duke Coulter on the J Bar B," McShane rumbled hoarsely. "Ramon Gomez rides the rough string to break wild horses for cow work, and he's the top fighting man of Mex town!"

"That's what I gathered," the Professor grunted, and pulled the slicker-pack from behind the cantle of his worn saddle. "Looks like you'll need all the gunhands you can round up."

THE IVORY KID'S eyes widened when the Profesor took two shell-studded belts from the pack and buckled them around his lean middle.

"I never knowed you to wear a gun before," the Ivory Kid whispered in an awed voice. "You handle them old smokepoles like a long-riding buscadero!"

"Your dad was twenty years older than you, Kid," the Professor answered quietly. "I was twenty years older than him, and it was me who taught him how to use both hands."

"You?" the Kid rasped. "You taught Jordan Bennett, the fastest gunswift on the Border?"

The Professor nodded. "I taught him like I taught you," he answered gravely. "You might have heard about Jack Bunty, who killed eighteen men before he was shot in both arms."

Speedy McShane nodded his white head. "That was more than thirty years ago," he said thoughtfully. "Jack Bunty was the fastest gunman in Texas, and he killed three men that night before he was shot to ribbons. He managed to get on his horse, and nobody ever heard of him after that."

"I knew him," the Profesor answered slowly. "He got down below the Border to a big ranch run by some Spanish folks. They nursed him back to health, but the nerves in his arms were dead for nearly three years. I never will forget a pretty blackeyed senorita by the name of Rita Cortez."

Speedy McShane was leaning forward, staring at the old Professor curiously. "You knew Rita Cortez?" he whispered.

The old musician nodded. "She was an angel," he answered, sighing. "She was only fifteen then, but she nursed me back to health."

"Rita Cortez was my wife, and Molly's mother," the old cattleman whispered hoarsely.

The Professor smiled gently. "Yes," he agreed. "And she got one of the finest men in Texas."

"And you knew her," McShane said, as though he did not believe his ears. "I know now. You are Jack Bunty!"

"Jack Bunty is dead!" the Professor snarled, glaring at Speedy McShane until the old cattleman nodded his head. "He died because every light-handed

gunslick along the Border insisted on committing suicide! They would bring him powdersmoke showdown, so Jack Bunty rode to Montana. And he died up there!"

"And may he rest in peace," Speedy McShane said solemnly. "We've always called you the Professor ever since you first drifted down here with Jordan Bennett, and that was more than twenty years ago."

"Twenty-three," the old musician corrected, grinning.

The Ivory Kid could understand now the years of practice on the piano, and the ceaseless drilling with two long-barreled six-guns. He felt suddenly humble when he reached out and took the Professor's right hand in his strong fingers.

"I saw Jack Bunty's grave with my own eyes," he said to Speedy McShane. "The Professor pointed it out to me up there in Montana."

"Like you said," McShane murmured softly. "But he taught the Professor all his gun magic before he rode into the West. Let's go in and get us a bait of hot grub. I hear Molly beating on the wreck pan!"

CHAPTER IV
Gun Law For Rustlers

WATCHING Molly McShane, the Ivory Kid saw her rope out a horse while he was saddling the big Morgan stallion. There had been some talk during supper.

The Kid's blue eyes smoldered when he remembered what he had heard about Duke Coulter. The big gambler had been twenty years old when he had ridden into Texico. He had signed on the Circle-M payroll when Molly was a long-legged girl of ten. Now Molly was nearly twenty, and the Kid sighed when he remembered the tender warmth of her beautiful body when she had put her arms around him at the old piano.

Molly McShane was wearing a brush coat over her tight wool shirt, and he could see the light .38 six-gun snuggled low on her shapely thigh.

"Looks like you was the only riding hand on the Circle M, Miss Molly," he began slowly. "Offhand, I'd say you'd better remain at home."

"We've got three hundred head of prime beef gathered in the lower river pasture," she told him. There was an edge to her husky voice. "It wouldn't take much to run them down across the Line, so don't waste your breath. We've all got rifles, and there are four of us now!"

The Ivory Kid's blue eyes brightened with admiration. Molly was the kind of a girl he had dreamed about during the long, lonely nights when the stars were bright. The Kid nodded when the Professor and McShane came out of the ranchhouse, and then he led the stallion from the barn and climbed quickly into the saddle.

Old Speedy McShane was a different man from the groping cripple the Kid had first seen in front of the Oasis Saloon. His eyes were shining with the light of battle when he called the other three together and outlined his plan to them. Even the Professor had changed, and the Kid stared for a moment and thought of Jack Bunty who had died up in Montana.

"The Rio Blanco marks the south boundary of my Circle-M range," McShane began quietly. "Our herd can't get across the river unless they're driven about five miles east, and even then they would have to swim to get over."

"That's what Chacon allowed," the Professor interrupted. "He said there would be eight men making the drive, and they would hit your range from the west end just about the time the moon came over the ridge."

"We've got to stop them before they start moving my herd," McShane exclaimed, and tapped the butt of his

Winchester. "Let's ride!"

The Ivory Kid knew what would happen if they sighted the raiders on Circle-M range. Guns would flame and saddles would empty. The Ivory Kid smiled coldly when he raised his head and saw the high rimrock over to the west.

"I was born over there on the J Bar B," he told the girl carelessly, but she caught the note of homesickness in his drawling voice.

She reached out and touched his hand. "And you will live there again," she told him confidently. "I knew it when I heard you play that sonata this afternoon."

SPEEDY McSHANE growled an order before the Kid could answer her. The old cattleman was staring hard at a group of riders coming across the big river pasture.

"Aim center and empty as many saddles as you can! That same gang killed three Circle-M cowboys, and they'll do the same for us if they get the chance!"

The three men raised their rifles and trained their sights when they caught the range. Molly McShane gasped, and triggered a shot over the heads of the rustlers. Her father swore softly when the sleeping herd down by the river suddenly came to their feet and broke into a run.

The Professor pressed trigger slowly just as the rustlers began to spread out, and a tall man pitched from his galloping horse. Speedy McShane moved the barrel of his rifle to follow a squat figure racing after the running cattle. The rifle barked spitefully, and the Professor gave grudging praise while he levered in a fresh shell.

"That tallies for Chacon," he told McShane. "And that hombre I got looked like Ramon Gomez through my sights."

Bullets whined like bees through the cottonwoods. The Ivory Kid narrowed his eyes and slowly squeezed off a shot to head off a rider storming after the bawling cattle.

"Three down," McShane counted grimly. "Ride your spurs and let's take the fight to them!"

None of the three men noticed the absence of Molly McShane as they sent their horses racing across the bottom land after the fleeing rustlers.

A sombrero-topped vaquero hipped in his saddle and sent three slugs at the Ivory Kid, who was within fifty yards of him. The Kid spoke softly to his mount and raised his rifle. The big stallion eased his pace and the rifle barked sharply between two jumps.

The Mexican screamed and pitched sideways from his running horse. He was dead before he hit the ground.

McShane and the Professor raced by on the opposite side of the stampeding herd, and the Kid found himself alone. He could see bobbing sombreros far ahead, and he turned quickly when the Professor and McShane fired alternately. He saw another saddle empty suddenly, and then he holstered his hot rifle in the saddle-boot.

"Molly!" he whispered hoarsely. "I forgot all about her!"

As he sent the big Morgan stallion racing back over the bottom land toward the river, a six-gun blazed savagely from the cover of the cottonwoods down by the Rio Blanco. That was where the Professor had knocked Ramon Gomez from the saddle.

The Kid spoke softly to his horse and made a dive for the high grass. He stayed down flat until a gloating laugh came from just in front. Then he palmed his right-hand gun and began to snake his way toward the sound.

"We ride, no, senorita?" a purring voice said softly. "The Keed, he is dead. Senor Coulter will be glad to see you, even if we do not get the Circle-M herd."

"Why do we not keel her?" another man said.

"Senor Coulter weeshes her alive," the purring voice retorted, chuckling.

The other vaquero laughed evilly as he studied the rope-bound figure of Molly

McShane as she sat in her saddle.

"The senorita, she have the soft heart," the purring-voiced Mexican said regretfully. "I am hit on the head when the rifle crash, and you ride over to give me aid. I come to myself just as you arrive, and now we ride. Senor Coulter he waits in the cantina of Manuel Lopez in Oldtown."

CAUTIOUSLY, the Ivory Kid parted a brush screen and came up to his knees. Ramon Gomez was mounted on a piebald horse. Another Mexican was sitting his mount nearby. The Kid gauged the distance between them when he rose slowly to his feet.

A twig crackled under his boots just as he leaped and Gomez twisted around in the saddle, his hand slapping for the butt of his six-gun. The other vaquero drew in a lightning movement.

The Kid side-stepped just as the vaquero's gun belched death. Gomez' gun crashed almost at the same time, but his slug went wide. The cowboy slipped the hammer under his thumb before the vaquero could ear back for another shot, and the Mexican screamed in agony as a bullet slammed through his brain.

Gomez triggered another frantic shot at the Kid, but his nervousness again caused him to miss. That miss was his undoing, because the Kid's ivory-handled gun bucked up with a throaty roar and Gomez coughed as he sank to his knees. The Mexican tried to reach the gun that slipped from his limp hand, and the Kid crouched low, waiting.

"Senor Coulter weel make things even for Ramon," the Mexican gasped. "He has sworn to keel the Ivory Kid!"

The Kid holstered his smoking six-gun and smiled bleakly. His every thought was for the man that had killed his father, and Molly McShane knew that he had forgotten her for the time being.

"Duke Coulter," the Kid asked quietly, "where can I find that rustling killer?"

"In the cantina of Manuel Lopez," the Mexican breathed weakly, and then he sank slowly to the ground.

The Ivory Kid waited until the polished high-heeled boots drummed briefly and settled to rest. Then he aroused himself with a guilty start and walked over to Molly McShane and lifted her from the saddle.

"Are you hurt?" he asked gruffly, untieing her bound hands.

Molly shook her head and tried to smile. Death was still too close, and she closed her dark eyes to hide the welling tears.

"I'm not hurt," she murmured, and hid her face against his rough wool shirt. "You—you killed him!"

"He had a killing coming to him," the Kid muttered. "He was going to take you back to Duke Coulter, and I haven't forgotten what that killer said to you back there by the store."

"He wants to marry me," the girl whispered, and snuggled closer to the big cowboy. "I'd rather be dead!"

The Ivory Kid held her close and patted her shoulders awkwardly. The warmth of her soft body made him forget the long trails of the past few years. Then he stiffened and let his eyes flicker over the body of Ramon Gomez.

"I've got to go," he said gruffly. "There's a man waiting for me back in Texico town."

"You can't leave me now!" the girl cried, and gripped him by the arms. "Duke Coulter will kill you!"

The cowboy raised his head when the girl called him by name. For years he had heard no other name except the Ivory Kid. He looked deep into the girl's dark eyes and smiled.

"I've waited five years to meet the man who killed old Jordan Bennett," he said slowly. "He's the same man who crippled Speedy McShane on a sneak. Tell Speedy I'm on my way to the cantina of Manuel Lopez in Oldtown!"

He was gone before Molly McShane realized it. He had vaulted into the saddle on the Morgan stallion and the big horse was gone like the night wind.

Molly watched him top a little rise and then she sat down, trying to fight off the tears in her eyes. She looked up suddenly when she heard the sound of horses' hoofs.

"Professor!" she called. "Dad!"

Two horses slid to a stop in the little clearing.

"Molly!" McShane called anxiously. "Where's the Kid?"

Molly jumped up and ran to her father. For a moment she clung to him while she tried to form the words that tumbled against her parted lips. Then she pointed to the body of Ramon Gomez.

"He caught me," she burst out. "He was going to take me to Duke Coulter! And then the Ivory Kid came. Now he's gone to Oldtown!"

The Professor growled savagely under his breath. "What's he doing there?"

"He went to meet Coulter," the girl sobbed. "In the cantina of Manuel Lopez in Oldtown!"

"Curses!" the old musician swore softly. "That's the toughest hole along the Border. And the one I got a job playing in," he added slowly, and turned to look at McShane.

"Head out," the old cattleman grunted. "Bend the wind, and I'll side you all the way!"

CHAPTER V
Sidewinder's Finish

DETERMINED and grim-faced, the Ivory Kid rode past the tie-rail that ran along the side of Manuel Lopez' cantina. Two sweating horses stood with drooping heads at the far end, and they wore the J-Bar-B brand on their left shoulders. Guttering lamps shed a yellow glow through the row of windows, with the chatter of excited Spanish echoing from the saloon.

The Kid swung down from the big Morgan stallion and trailed his bridle reins to ground-hitch the horse. The powerful animal would make short work of any vaquero who tried to mount him. The tall cowboy tilted his ivory-handled guns and cat-footed to the side door. The back room was empty when he stepped inside and placed his shoulders against the adobe wall.

Several green-topped tables stood along one wall, with cards and chips strewn carelessly to show that the players had left suddenly, and in evident excitement. An old upright piano was placed under an arch connecting the gambling room with the saloon, and the Kid's eyes rested on it briefly before shifting to the long bar.

Duke Coulter stood halfway down the bar, with Trigger Farrel at one side, facing the swinging doors. Two jabbering Mexicans were telling the big gambler about the fight at the Circle-M, and one of the raiders was bleeding from a scalp wound. Border-born, the Ivory Kid understood every word they said.

"Many men were waiting, senor," a tall vaquero was saying. "They kill Chacon and Ramon. Only Juan and myself escape. This Ivory Keed was the worst, and he shoot like *El Diablo* himself!"

Silently the Kid crossed the back room and seated himself at the old piano. His long, sensitive fingers brushed the ivory handles of his guns to set them under his hands just so. Then he raised his hands and poised them over the rutted ivory keys.

A crash of bass and the ripple of the treble keys brought instant silence to the smoke-filled cantina. Every head jerked toward the back room.

Duke Coulter leaned forward, hands shadowing his twin guns. For a moment he stared at the tall cowboy who was watching him from under hooded lids. Then the big gambler grinned wolfishly and moved slowly toward the arch.

Trigger Farrel followed, with his right hand under the left side of his coat, and the Kid saw the black stock of a

sawed-off shotgun.

The gambler stopped just outside the arch and stood spraddle-legged. The Ivory Kid ran the upper keys while his left hand poised above the bass notes. Then the hand fell with a crash, and Duke Coulter began to talk quietly when the chords echoed away. The Kid was playing softly, like water falling over smooth rocks in the moonlight.

"Old Jordan Bennett was beat to the gun right at the first table," Coulter almost whispered. "He was supposed to be double fast, but his guns never cleared leather."

The Ivory Kid stiffened, then recovered his composure. His blue eyes smoldered from between slitted lids under his old black Stetson. Duke Coulter waited, watching him carefully. Then Duke smiled and continued to talk in that low, irritating whisper.

"Jack Bunty taught Jordan Bennett all he knew about six-guns," he sneered. "But Bennett lost his nerve when he turned in his sheriff's star."

"Jack Bunty is dead," the Kid answered softly. "I saw his grave up in Montana. You were talking about Jordan Bennett."

He did not raise his drawling voice when he repeated the name of his father. Duke Coulter leaned forward and sucked in a deep breath. His face was emotionless.

"Yeah—Jordan Bennett," he said. "I took over the J Bar B after we planted your old man up on Boot Hill. I warned you to get out of town, and I've saved you a grave up there next to your kin!"

THE IVORY KID stared at the gambler and continued to stroke the worn ivory keys. The fingers of his right hand rippled smoothly across the upper keys, while his left hand rose and fell to bring out the changing rhythm of the bass.

"Then old Speedy McShane tried *his* luck," Coulter taunted softly. "He thought he had a chance, and he came down here just to square up for his old partner, Jordan Bennett. You heard what happened to him."

"Yeah, I heard," the Ivory Kid murmured, and he smiled when his eyes flicked briefly to the front doors. "Did you ever hear this piece I'm playing?"

Duke Coulter shrugged and showed his white teeth in a broad smile.

"Moonlight Sonata," he answered. "Your last one!"

Slowly the Ivory Kid shook his head. "Yours," he corrected quietly. "And I call it by another name. Old Jordan Bennett used to play it, and you know where he is! You'll be there yourself, come sunrise!"

Duke Coulter stared for a moment and then laughed softly. "I'll be there," he agreed "—watching them lower you into a three-by-seven!"

"You won't be watching," the Kid contradicted. "You'll be wrapped up in a tarp, with two catch ropes letting you down in that hole you mentioned!"

"Smoke him, Boss!" Trigger Farrel suggested hoarsely, and threw his coat aside, revealing the shotgun hanging by a strap over his left shoulder. "Smoke that killing son for what he done to Chacon and Ramon Gomez."

The Ivory Kid shook his head, grinning. "You didn't watch the front door, Trigger," he said softly. "I wouldn't reach for that sawed-off, if I was you!"

Farrel whirled around with a startled look in his greenish eyes. He raised his hands slowly when he saw Speedy McShane sighting him over the barrel of his .45 Peacemaker.

Duke Coulter turned his head slightly to glance into the mirror of the back bar, and his eyes widened when he saw the man he thought was hopelessly crippled. He set his lips hard and turned his eyes back to the Ivory Kid. Then the big gambler stiffened when he saw another tall, lean form just inside the door.

The Professor was watching him, a little smile curling his thin lips, and his pair of smoke-grimed six-guns were covering the two Mexican raiders from the J Bar B.

"I don't want you," the Professor said. "I stepped aside for a better man, but you won't have a Chinaman's chance. Jack Bunty trained the Kid ever since we left Texico town."

"Bunty?"

The old Professor nodded curtly. "You never saw Jack Bunty, but you've heard of him," he answered quietly. "He was a two-gun hombre, but he could use either hand without the other."

Duke Coulter laughed scornfully. "I've heard about that old buscadero," he muttered. "And I heard that he took up playing the piano when he lost his nerve."

"He never lost his nerve," the Professor corrected quietly. "He just got tired of killing off all the gun-hung badmen who asked for a showdown. He got so he could play the piano with his right hand and beat a fast gunswift to the draw with his left."

Coulter stared for a moment and squared his shoulders. "And Jack Bunty trained the Kid to do the same?" he asked.

The Professor nodded. "Take yourself," he grunted. "You've got to drive both hands to your holsters at the same time. Watch the Kid tickling the ivories. His right hand moves fast to play the melody, while his left hand just stops any old time. Each hand works independent of the other."

The gambler watched the Kid, and he licked his lips. Little wrinkles sprayed out from the corners of his eyes to tell of his growing nervousness. And while he watched the Kid, the Professor added fuel to the fire.

"You sent Hub Halloway out to the Circle M to smoke the Kid," the old musician went on. "The Kid was playing that same piece, and he kept right on playing with his right hand while his left tallied your killing pard!"

Duke Coulter snapped his teeth together and went into a crouch.

"I saw Hub when his horse came tearing home," he gritted. "I'm taking up for him!"

"Sure," the Professor grated coldly. "You're going to be right busy taking up for yourself. You killed the Kid's dad on a sneak, and you stole the J Bar B. He's come home to square up for both!"

"On your feet, gunswift!" the gambler snarled at the Ivory Kid.

STARING calmly into Coulter's hard gray eyes, the Kid went on with his playing. His hands were moving slowly over the yellowed keys and the music was fading to a softer pitch. The fingers of his right hand rippled up and down, and then the left hand struck a deep, rich chord to end the composition.

"I've played the last tune for you, Duke Coulter," he said, a vibrant hum in his deep voice. "And I've named it special for you. You'd like to know?"

He turned slowly on the creaky stool, with his hands hooked in his shell-studded belts.

The big gambler stared like a man in a dream, and then he slowly nodded at the Kid.

"What do you call it?" he demanded.

"Boot Hill Sonata," the tall cowboy said, and stretched to his feet.

Speedy McShane was standing just inside the front doors, with his hat pushed back to show the silver in his thick hair. The Professor was watching the two vaqueros, but he could see the Kid and Duke Coulter just a little to one side of his line of vision.

The Ivory Kid was staring at the gambler, with no emotion on his hard tanned face. He had waited years for this moment, and he was conscious of a throb of fierce exultation in the pulse that beat against the tips of his long fingers. Then he spoke.

"I'm taking the J Bar B over tomorrow, Coulter. Right after your funeral!"

Coulter crouched lower, his hands almost touching the blackened walnut handles of his twin guns. Without warning, he drove his arms down in unison. His clammy fingers wrapped around familiar wood, with his thumbs curling

back the hammers, and the long barrels glided against the oiled leather of his holsters.

The Ivory Kid was leaning forward, watching the slitted gray eyes. He began to see red now, and his right hand whipped down with a blinding blur of speed. The long fingers that had rippled the keys found the smooth touch of ivory on his right leg, and his thumb slipped the hammer while the black snout of his iron was tilting over the lip of the holster.

Duke Coulter was just clearing leather when flaming death tunneled through his heart and set him back on his high heels. Both thumbs dropped hammers before he could raise his guns. His fingers curled open to drop the smoking weapons to the floor, and the tall gambler's knees unhinged and curled down on top of them.

Trigger Farrel threw his coat aside and swiveled the shotgun from under his arm. Speedy McShane squeezed off a shot just as the Ivory Kid turned his back and walked past the Professor, through the side door and into the night.

The Kid stepped into a small stable next to the cantina. A horse that was tied there had aroused his curiosity.

"Jordan," a throaty voice called softly—and Molly walked close to him, clad in riding clothes.

"Molly!" he cried, as she brushed her fingers across his lips. "Molly McShane!"

He held the girl tight while he closed his eyes to force out the yellow light.

"I've taken over the old J Bar B," he told her after a pause. "I'm going to live there, maybe."

THE girl raised her dark eyes to his finely chiseled face. "Why do you say 'maybe'," she asked.

"Maybe you will like the name of Molly Bennett," the Ivory Kid said. "And maybe old Speedy McShane will throw his outfit in with ours and be partners, like he said tonight."

"Molly Bennett," the girl said happily, and kissed him. "I'll love it!"

"Me, too," a deep voice muttered behind the happy pair. "I'll pard you, but I'll keep the name of Speedy Mc Shane, providing the Professor will make a hand—and under one other condition."

"Just give it a name, Speedy," the Ivory Kid said eagerly. "And consider it done."

"Don't play that graveyard tune no more," the old cattleman growled. "I don't like that Boot Hill Sonata!"

Nesselrode Clay goes out to find some flowers for his lady love, and runs smack into a trio of outlaws in—

LOVE AND THE CACTUS KID

By LOUIS L'AMOUR

A NOVELET OF ROMANCE AND ACTION—COMING NEXT ISSUE!

"Stop playing," she cried, "and listen to me!"

Wild Girl of the Bar-B

By BEN FRANK

FROM a distance, Pinpoint Lake fringed by the dark green of pines, appeared as a blue dot against the vast bulk of Bald-top Mountain. But to the girl astride the big black horse, it spread invitingly before her, wide and deep, cool against the summer's heat. Laughingly she slid to the narrow, sun-drenched sandy beach and turned her horse loose to wander into the tree shade.

The girl stepped to the water's edge. Her name was Martha Beckman. At

No Man Had Ever Tamed Martha Beckman's Stormy Heart!

nineteen she was as free as a sky-circling eagle, as wild as the cattle that roamed her father's range, and willful and passionately proud as a mountain storm.

She whipped the pearl-gray Stetson from her mass of black, loose curls and flung it aside. The high sun touched the smooth tan of her cheeks, threw the shadow of her small chin against the white hollow of her slender throat, etched out the soft, wide curves of her mouth. Her eyes, sometimes sparkling with fun, sometimes flashing with wild anger, were as black as her hair.

With a quick lithe movement, she shook out a large white towel and spread it on the hot sand. She unbuckled the gunbelt from about her slim waist and dropped it and the pearl-handled sixgun to the towel. She undressed swiftly, all but her hand-tooled riding boots, and piled her clothes atop the gun. Still laughing, she climbed to the top of a boulder, whose base was submerged in the lake, kicked off her boots and stood poised for a moment like a beautiful marble-carved goddess, her slender, perfect body glistening in the sun. Then she leaped.

Striking the water, she scarcely made a sound or a ripple. She sank down and down, liking the shock of the snow-born lake water against her hot skin. She touched bottom, twisted and arose to the surface. With a toss of her head, she flung water and hair from her eyes. Arms and legs flashing, she struck out for the opposite shore.

In the shallows she crouched with her head and shoulders in the sun. A junco scolded from a tall pine. She laughed up at it, slid forward and began to swim unhurriedly back toward her starting place. The chill of the water was now beginning to crawl deeply into her, and she wanted to lie in the sun on the white sands.

SHE had reached the shadows of the boulder before the strange sound caught her attention. Startled, she let her feet sink and began to tread, listening. It came again, a merry, lively tune. Lifting her black eyes, she stared upward and saw the man sitting cross-legged on the boulder, his blond hair waving in the breeze, a cherry-red fiddle tucked under his brown chin. His eyes were very blue and laughing down at her.

Martha's surprise turned to shock, and then to anger.

"Get out, you—you peeping Tom!" she shouted.

He lowered the fiddle, and the laughter in his eyes ran down to his wide mouth and emerged in sound. His face was lean and ruggedly handsome, but she wasn't thinking of that. She was thinking of her nakedness and feeling her anger growing.

"Thought shore enough I'd found a mermaid,"—and now the laughter was in his soft drawl—"but when I saw your clothes—"

He put the fiddle under his chin and began to play a saucy, maddening little melody.

"Go away!" she shouted.

"First," he drawled, "let me tell you how beautiful you are. That black hair and those black, flashing eyes and—"

Now her teeth were beginning to chatter from cold, and suddenly her anger turned to fury. She sank to the bottom, found a stone, came up and hurled it at him.

"Get out!" she screamed.

He shoved to his feet, a tall, slim young man in worn levis and a dusty tan shirt open at the throat.

"From down there," he observed good-naturedly, "you couldn't hit the side of a hay barn."

Tucking the fiddle under an arm, he turned and walked away, rolling a little in his worn high-heeled boots. She saw his horse then, a tired sorrel wearing a worn saddle. The stranger stopped beside the horse, slipped the fiddle into a wooden case dangling from the saddle-horn, then ambled from sight beyond a ledge of granite rocks.

She made a run for it, caught up the

towel by the corners and dodged behind a clump of bushes. Not taking time to dry herself, she slipped into her clothes, buttoned her white shirt, hooked the short green riding skirt about her waist and strapped on the gun. Pulling the Stetson angrily over her wet hair, she crossed the white sand to the boulder, climbed up and began to put on her boots.

"Holler when you're fit," the man called.

"I'm dressed if that's what you mean," she returned.

She watched him narrowly as he came toward her, wondering who he was and whence he came. He stopped for a moment and spoke gently to his tired horse. Then, grinning infuriatingly, he came toward her.

It was his wide grin, along with her feeling of embarrassment and wild anger, that made her do it. She pulled the gun from its holster and leveled it at him.

"My turn to watch you swim," she said. "Come up here."

The laughter drained out of him, and his jaw went slack.

"Now, miss," he began worriedly, "I—"

She thumbed back the hammer. "Come on up!"

He climbed up on the huge boulder and got to his feet, taller and younger than she had thought him to be.

"Take off your shirt," she ordered.

He took one look into her narrowed dark eyes above the gun barrel, peeled off his shirt and stood before her, brown and bare to the waist, a slow flush stealing into his face. His shoulders were finely muscled, his body lean and hard.

"Now what?" he rasped.

"Boots," she said.

He took off his boots.

"Dive," she commanded.

He stepped to the edge of the boulder and stared down at the water. Slowly his eyes met hers, and now there was neither embarrassment nor anger in them, but something which she was too furious to try to understand.

"Looks deep," he muttered.

"It is," she returned. "On your way, Peeping Tom!"

"The name's Bill Miller," he said quietly, "in case you'd ever want to know. Home, Texas."

She waved the gun toward the water. "Dive!" she said again.

HE JUMPED feet first and landed awkwardly, arms and legs flailing the water. He gasped, went down, came up choking and floundering. He went down again, and then she understood that look in his eyes. Bill Miller from Texas could not swim.

She dropped the gun, flung her heavy gunbelt aside, stepped out of her skirt, kicked off her boots, dived. She surfaced and shook water from her eyes. Arms threshing wildly, he came up not far away, the sun glistening on his wet blond hair. She went after him. She twisted the fingers of her left hand in his hair and held his face above water.

"Take it easy, Bill," she said quietly.

She began to swim shoreward, and then it hit her. She felt it first in her left leg, the tightening of muscles, the searing pain. Keeping a tight grip on his hair, she rolled over on her back and began to fight her way toward the beach. One arm and one leg, the going was slow. The thing she was attempting to do became torture, and her face twisted with pain. Then her right leg cramped, and she went under and could not rise.

"This is it!" she thought. "One too many swims in cold water. I should have listened to dad. Should never have come here alone—"

Her lungs were on fire. Blood hammered against her ear drums. The water was turning purple. Now black. It was like ink. Cold, black ink, robbing her of life—

She opened her eyes to the blinding sun. She lay on the white sands, and someone was working over her, forcing the water out of her lungs. She stared

up into a strange, brown face. Then she remembered and struggled to a sitting position.

The sun glistened on Bill Miller's brown shoulders and flat waist. He looked frightened.

"Gee, honey," he said, "you like to scared the life out of me!"

Anger stormed through her, and she drew back from him.

"You pulled me out! You can swim!"

"Like a duck," he said, giving her an unhappy one-sided smile. "I was only fooling—I'm sorry."

"You—you low-down—"

"Peeping Tom," he added sadly. "I'm sorry, honey. I—"

"Don't honey me!" she said. She struggled to her feet, and when he tried to help her, spat, "Don't touch me!"

Suddenly he was angry, too. He caught her roughly by the shoulders and shook her.

"Listen to me, you little wildcat," he said. "I was just riding through the country, hoping I'd find a job somewhere, when I ran across this lake. Decided to give my horse a rest and tune up the old fiddle. Saw your clothes. Climbed up on that boulder and saw you swimming toward me. So—"

"—you watched—"

"I'm doing the talking," he cut in, giving her another shake. "You swam up to the rock and told me to get. I got, while you dressed. Then, for no reason at all, you flew off the handle and made me jump in. Never even asked me if I could swim. So I decided to teach you a thing or two and—"

No one had ever talked to Martha Beckman like this. For a long moment, she could only stare at him in surprise. Then:

"Okay, Bill, you're one up on me at the moment, and one good turn deserves another. I'm Martha Beckman. My dad owns the Bar-B and can always use another man. Get on your shirt and throw my stuff down here."

Suddenly his anger was gone. He held out a big hand.

"Martha—the name doesn't fit you, but I like it. Let's call it even and be—"

Ignoring his hand, she turned away. He shrugged, climbed up on the boulder and handed down her boots, skirt and gunbelt.

"Wild girl," he said softly, "it's time somebody was looking after you, seeing that nothing really bad happens to you."

Her black eyes narrowed and strangely intent, she looked up at him. "You wouldn't be thinking of taking over the job?"

"All my life," he answered, a dreamy look touching his blue eyes, "I've been looking for something without knowing exactly what it was I wanted. Now I know. I was looking for you, Martha."

"A pretty speech," she said scornfully, "but I doubt if you're man enough to—"

He leaped from the boulder, caught her roughly in his arms and tipped her face up to his. She was helpless against his brute strength. She thought he was going to kiss her and suddenly hoped he would. But he released her without touching her lips, picked up his hat and mashed it down over his wet hair.

"Maybe I'm not man enough," he muttered.

Cheeks burning, she turned toward her horse. "Anyway," she said, "it may be interesting to see how you compare with Brant Stone."

"Who's Brant Stone?"

"Owner of the Crooked-S and quite a man," she answered. "He too thinks it's time someone was looking after me. Taming me, so he puts it. When Brant wants something, he usually gets it, one way or another."

A slow grin formed on the Texan's wide mouth.

"Funny thing," he drawled, "I'm kinda that way myself. Might complicate things if Stone and I happened to want the same thing. . . ."

The Bar-B ranch buildings and corrals lay in a spring-fed valley. The day was spent, and the shadows were deepening.

Tom Beckman's coal-black hair was shot with gray, but in spite of his sixty years, he was as straight as an arrow and as tough as iron. At forty, he had married a young school teacher who had given him a girl child before she had died. The child he had named Martha after his own mother, and he had spoiled her and he knew it. But he loved her fiercely and was proud of her dark beauty and knew that under her wildness lay the makings of a woman as fine as her mother and his own mother had been.

"Someday," he had once said to old Sig Olsen, his foreman, who allowed that Martha needed corraling, "the girl'll find a man who can tame her. But till then, Sig, I reckon she's more'n you and me can hope to handle."

Now, a few hours after he had hired Bill Miller, Tom sat on the wide porch of the ranch house, eyeing his daughter through a haze of cigar smoke.

"Kind of a handsome rascal, that Texan," he muttered. "Like him?"

"Maybe. Maybe not." The girl's dark eyes met his steadily. "Maybe I'm wondering how Bill Miller will stack up against Brant Stone."

Frowning, Tom shoved to his feet. No one had ever questioned Stone's claim on Martha except the girl herself. But this Texan didn't look as if he'd stand for being pushed around much. Mumbling something about hearing in town that Brant was planning a big barn dance and party, the old man went into the house.

Martha leaned back against a porch post and stared up at the darkening sky. From the bunkhouse came laughter, then a moment's silence, followed by a burst of fiddle music. She remembered the hard strength of Bill Miller's arm, the contradictory gentleness of his blue eyes. She thought of Brant Stone, who usually got what he wanted. She had known Brant a long time. Sometimes she believed she would give in and marry him. Tonight, she wasn't sure. Tonight she felt like a tired, frightened child.

Suddenly angry at herself for feeling this way, she ran to the horse corral, caught and saddled a fresh mount and raced off into the night. Once again, she was the girl of the Bar-B, recklessly unafraid.

During the next few days, Martha learned a little about the Texan. His father was a rancher. The youngest of four brothers, Bill had found himself about to be sent East to study law and had rebelled.

"Funny thing," he told her one evening as they rode leisurely through the valley, "seems like all I ever wanted to do was ride a horse and play a fiddle. About a week before I was to leave for school, I saddled up and headed north. Reckon I wouldn't have run away like that before my mother died, but—

"You kind of remind me of her, Martha. She had eyes like yours, but her hair wasn't as dark. She could ride and shoot and play a violin. She was pretty wonderful."

Always restless, Bill had wandered from one job to another until that day he had ridden to Pinpoint Lake.

One Saturday evening, Brant Stone rode to the Bar-B ranch. A tall, dark man in his late twenties, he sat for a time in the big front room of the ranch house, talking business with Tom Beckman. At last, his flinty gray eyes flickered to Martha's face.

"Heard you picked up a new man, Tom," he said, watching the girl. "A fiddler. Like to meet him. Want to hire him to play for my barn dance."

Tom shifted uneasily. He'd never liked Stone too well, and now something in the man's voice worried him.

"What's the matter with old Pops Weaver?" Tom mumbled. "He's always done the fiddling around—"

"Pops is a better fiddle maker than a fiddle player," Brant cut in. "If this new man's a better fiddler than Pops, he's the man I want."

Martha hadn't missed the hard challenge in Brant's voice. She flashed him a smile and stood. She wore a simple

white frock that made her hair and eyes seem darker than ever, and the sudden wild pumping of her heart flooded her cheeks with color.

"I'll find Bill for you," she said, turned and hurried from the house.

Brant followed her, caught up with her at the corner of the house and slipped an arm about her waist.

"Watch it!" she said sharply, and he dropped his arm.

"Someday," he said, his voice harsh, "I'm going to get tired of being put off. I'm—"

He was interrupted by a foot-tingling tune from Bill Miller's fiddle.

MARTHA could feel Stone tense. The rancher, she knew, had heard more about the Texan than the fact he could play a violin. Brant, she guessed rightly, had heard that she and Bill had been taking rides through the moonlight.

They found the Texan perched on the top rail of the horse corral. As they approached, he stopped playing.

"Bill," she said, "this is Brant Stone."

"Howdy, Brant," Bill drawled. "Heard about you."

"I've heard about you, too," Stone said pointedly. "Came over to hire you to play for the dance I'm giving."

Bill tucked the fiddle under his chin and began to play softly. "Funny thing," he said gently, "I play only because I like to, never for money."

"Then maybe you'd like to play for the dance?"

"Don't reckon I would. Like to dance too well."

"Every man has his price, Miller."

Bill slid to the ground. "If I wanted to play for your dance, it wouldn't cost you a cent. But since I don't want to play—"

He shrugged, grinned good-naturedly and headed for the bunkhouse.

Brant watched him go in silence. But when he did speak, his voice rumbled with anger.

"Time I was getting back home," he said. "See you at the party, Martha. Don't forget, the first dance is mine as usual."

He strode to his horse, a big man who seldom failed to get his way, mounted and rode from the Bar-B at a fast clip.

"Bill," Martha warned the next day, "you have an enemy in Brant Stone."

She was dressed in the green riding skirt and a tan blouse open at her white throat. Her gypsy-like wildness made her very lovely, and she knew it. She could see it reflected in Bill's gaze.

He let her statement about Brant pass without comment.

"Where you going, wild girl?" he asked, smiling.

"Swimming. Pinpoint Lake," she answered and saw the smile leave his face.

"No," he said. "Not alone."

She laughed and swung into the saddle. "Try to stop me," she said and spurred her horse into a run.

At the top of the first hill, she glanced back. Bill stood in the sun where she had left him. She waved tauntingly, but he did not wave back. She rode on, half expecting him to follow her, hoping he would, but he didn't. At the lake, she climbed upon the boulder and stared down at the deep, placid water. She had brought a bathing suit this time, but had left it in the saddle bag, for she knew Bill was right. She would not go swimming alone again, ever. For the first time in her life, she was afraid of something.

At first, her fear surprised her, and then turned her unreasonably angry. Angry at the Texan. She slid from the boulder, gathered up stones and hurled them savagely into the water. Then she did something she hadn't done for a long time. She buried her face in her arms and cried.

The Texan had done something to her. He had made her afraid. And he could make her furious and could make her weep. She told herself she hated him.

She sat up, splashed icy water over

her face, mounted and rode slowly back to the ranch. Someway, somehow, she was going to hurt Bill Miller because of what he had done to her. . . .

The Crooked-S hay barn was a huge affair, lighted with lanterns hung from the log ceiling beams. Ranchers and their families, cowboys and their girls arrived early for the party and stood about in noisy, laughing groups, drinking sweet cider and visiting as they waited for old Pops Weaver from the little cowtown of Lost Spur to start the music.

For a moment, Martha Beckman stood poised in the big double doorway, looking about. Again she wore a shimmering white dress, for white was her color. It enhanced her dark loveliness. She saw Brant Stone, handsome in new boots, tan corded trousers and a Mexican embroidered shirt, shaking hands with some of his guests.

Her flashing black eyes moved about the long room and located Bill Miller. The lantern light tangled with his blond hair, and his blue eyes were fixed on her. Heart hammering, smiling, she moved toward Bill, who stood with a group of Bar-B boys.

Brant saw her and hurried after her. Her timing was perfect. He caught up with her just as she stepped close to the lanky Texan.

"The first dance is mine, Martha," Brant said.

"Sorry, I promised the first one to Bill," she replied.

The music began. Anger leaped into Brant's eyes, and he took a menacing step forward, but Bill grinned and took Martha into his arms.

"You heard what the lady said, Brant," he drawled.

They swung onto the floor and some of the Bar-B boys tittered. Martha flung a quick glance at Stone. His face was white with anger.

"Can't recall you promised the first dance with me," Bill drawled, "but thanks, anyway."

She smiled up at him and let her black curls brush his cheek, knowing that Brant Stone was watching her every move.

LATER when Martha was dancing with old Tom Beckman, she saw Brant approach the Texan, speak curtly, nod toward the door and then stride outside. A thin grin on his lean face, Bill followed the man.

Tom hadn't missed any of it. He halted his clumsy dancing and gave his daughter a little shake.

"You've started something," he said angrily. "Now you'd better stop it before it goes too far."

Martha slipped through the jostling crowd and hurried out into the bright moonlight. Excitement filled her. No one had ever before challenged Brant's right to the first dance with her. Men had never before fought over the wild girl of the Bar-B.

She found the two men standing between a surrey and a spring wagon. Brant's voice, harsh with anger, came to her above the background of music and stamping feet.

"Take your choice, Miller," he was saying. "Fight, or get out!"

"I'll get out," Bill said in his soft Texas drawl.

He turned away and walked swiftly toward his horse.

For a moment, Martha was too stunned to move. Then she was wildly furious with him. Didn't he think she was worth fighting for? Or was he afraid of Brant Stone?

Turning, she almost stumbled head-on into old Tom, who had followed her outside. He walked with her into the barn, and when she glanced up at the rugged face, she saw anger in his eyes.

"Try behaving yourself the rest of the evening," he said coldly.

Deep in her heart, she knew he had a right to be angry with her, but her willful wildness was strong within her. She shook back her black hair and looked up at him out of flashing eyes.

"I'll behave as I please," she retorted.

"Someday, Martha," her father said heavily, "you'll do something you'll be mighty sorry for."

She laughed, turned and allowed herself to be swept away in the arms of a gangling Bar-B rannie, who had come to claim his turn with her. . . .

She hadn't missed a dance and she was tired, but lying in her bed with the white moonlight flooding over her, she could not sleep. She arose, went to a window and stared out at the beauty of the night. The barns, the dark bunkhouse, the thin, lacy patterns of the corrals. A sound came to her faintly, and she cocked her head to one side, listening. It came again, the sweet tones of a violin.

She dressed swiftly and ran into the wide yard. Again she caught the sound of the fiddle. Eyes bright, she followed the music past the corrals and barns and out into the open valley beyond.

Then she saw him sitting on a white, flat boulder with the gleaming fiddle tucked under his square chin. He was unaware of her until she spoke. Then he spun about to face her.

"Didn't suppose anyone could hear me this far away," he grinned. "You liked to scared the wits out of me, Martha."

"You scare easily," she said with deep scorn. "I happened to overhear and see that little scene between you and Brant tonight."

He said nothing, tucked the fiddle under his chin again and began to play softly.

"Stop that," she cried, "and listen to me!"

But he kept on playing, and his indifference infuriated her beyond all reason. She caught the instrument from him, lifted it high and smashed it against the boulder.

He leaped to his feet, towered above her, and for a moment she thought he was going to strike her. But he let his hands fall limply to his sides.

"That was my mother's violin," he said gently. "She taught me to play and gave it to me just before she died."

Head bowed, he turned from her and stumbled away. Horrified at what she had done, she slumped down on the boulder with the broken fiddle clutched in her hands. She had found a way to hurt Bill Miller. She had driven the knife into his heart and twisted it cruelly.

"Bill," she called. "Bill, wait!"

But he kept on going, and she could not make herself go after him. All her reckless anger was gone now, and she was remembering her father's words: "Someday you'll do something you'll be mighty sorry for." Sobs shook her.

"I'll have it repaired," she thought. "I'll take it to Pops Weaver. He makes fiddles; he can fix this one."

She stumbled to her feet, ran to the horse corral and saddled her big-boned black. Still sobbing, she mounted and rode to Lost Spur.

Looking like a ghost in his long nightshirt, old Pops stared first at the broken fiddle and then at the white-faced girl.

"Now, stop your cryin', Martha honey," he said. "Sure, I can fix this fiddle, but not 'fore morning. It ain't busted so bad, but glue don't dry overnight."

"How soon?" she asked.

"Three, four days, maybe. Soon as it's ready, I'll bring it to you. How's that?"

"Thanks, Pops," she said and hurried back to her horse.

THE FIRST FAINT light of day was beginning to show in the east when Martha crawled wearily into bed. She was asleep when Bill Miller saddled his sorrel, tied on his bed roll and few belongings, including the empty fiddle case, and rode away from the Bar-B.

"Can't understand it," old Tom said at noon that day. "Bill just up and quit. Didn't say why. A good man, that Texan. Hated to see him go. Maybe he is afraid of Brant."

"You mean," Martha gasped, "Bill has gone?"

The old man glanced up and knew by the whiteness of her face that she had something to do with the Texan's sudden departure. But he asked no questions. If the girl had anything she wanted to tell him, she'd get around to it, sooner or later. If she didn't want to tell him, there would be no dragging it from her.

He had liked Bill Miller. He had hoped that maybe the Texan was the man who could bring out the girl's fine qualities without breaking her spirit. A man like Stone . . . He frowned, remembering how Brant would beat a stubborn wild horse into submission.

Two days later, word reached the Bar-B that Bill Miller was working on the Triangle Ranch, which lay across the mountains beyond Pinpoint Lake. That same day, Martha told her father about the fiddle.

"It was his mother's violin," she said unhappily. "I did a terrible thing and without reason. I'm in love with the boy, Dad. What shall I do?"

This was the first time since she had been a child that she had asked for his advice. He was more deeply moved than he wanted her to know. He blamed himself bitterly for allowing the girl to grow up willful and wild. Perhaps, if her mother had lived—

"Well," he said gruffly, "when Pops brings the fiddle to you, you'll have to take it to Bill. That's all you can do, Martha. The rest is up to Bill."

"I'll send word to him that it's here," she said, the old passionate pride flashing in her eyes. "If he wants it, he can come after it. If—"

Her voice faltered, and her eyes dropped. "No," she added quietly. "I'll take it to him."

Smiling to himself, old Tom got to his feet and wandered out to the horse corral. Maybe this thing would work itself out for the best, after all, he thought.

Pops Weaver showed up at the Bar-B the following day. He had the cherry red fiddle wrapped in a soft flannel cloth. He uncovered it with gentle fingers and held it toward the girl.

"It's the best fiddle I ever had hold of," he said. "See—you can hardly tell it's been broken."

Martha took the instrument and held it against her heart.

"Thanks, Pops," she said. "If there's anything I can ever do for you—"

He smiled, shook his white head and hobbled away. A few minutes later, Martha was galloping the long-legged black toward the mountains.

She came to Pinpoint Lake and stopped to let the horse drink. She remembered how she had come here so many times to swim alone in the cold water. She remembered the day when she had first seen Bill Miller sitting on the boulder with the fiddle tucked under his chin. She remembered her old wildness, the thrill of reckless riding and living dangerously. She thought of how she had never known the meaning of fear until that last time she had come here alone.

Frowning, she rode on through the pines, skirting the lake. Recklessness, danger, angry pride, all these seemed no longer to be a part of her. The wild girl of the Bar-B belonged to the past. She had vanished one night when a cherry red fiddle had been hurled against a moon-splashed boulder.

She came to the timber's edge and pulled the black up sharply. Below in a narrow valley opening toward the west, she saw two men riding toward each other. They were Bill Miller and Brant Stone.

The men met, halted and faced each other in a moment's silence. Then Brant spoke, his voice carrying distinctly up to her.

"Been hoping I'd run across you, Miller," he said. "Wanted to tell you that when I told you to get out the night of the dance, I meant get out of the country!"

"Funny thing," Bill said in his slow Texas way, "how you misunderstood my leaving your dance that night. I wasn't

afraid of you, Stone. People had come to your party to have a good time, and I didn't want to spoil things by knocking the daylights out of you."

"There's no party here to spoil," Brant snapped.

WIDE-EYED, the girl watched the two men dismount and circle warily. They were about the same height, but Brant was the heavier of the two. She had never seen him in a fight, but she had heard how he fought. Fists, boots and without rules. She wanted to shout a warning to Bill to be wary of trickery, but this was something she must stay out of. This was Bill's and Brant's fight.

Brant rushed in, and Bill gave ground. Horrified, she saw Brant driving him back toward a ledge of rock. She understood Brant's strategy. He expected the Texan to trip and fall backwards.

It happened as Brant had planned it. Unaware of the ledge, Bill tripped, lost his balance and sprawled on his back. Brant flung himself on the fallen man. Martha heard Bill cry out in pain, and she almost cried out with him. Then, someway, Bill got to his feet.

Brant was suddenly too sure of himself. He came in, swinging recklessly. Bill side-stepped, swung, and Brant staggered back. Bill pressed his advantage, and in the next few minutes, Martha realized that the Texan was more than a match for Brant. The fight was over as suddenly as it had begun, with the Texan towering over the battered rancher. "If you've had enough, Stone," Bill panted, "I'll ride on."

Stone sat up. "All right, boys," he shouted hoarsely.

Two Crooked-S men came riding from behind a mass of tumbled boulder where they had been hidden. They were big men, hard-faced. They wore six-guns, and each carried a heavy club. Their purpose was evident from the first. They converged upon Bill Miller.

There was no escape for the Texan, but he laughed shortly. "So this is the way you do your fighting, Stone," he said and squared off for the fight he could not hope to win.

"I usually get what I want, one way or another," Brant gritted. "Let him have it, men!"

Martha spurred her horse into the open, and her pearl-handled gun flashed.

"The fun's all over," she said. "Climb on your horses and slink back to your Crooked-S like good little boys!"

At the moment, it was the wild girl of the Bar-B speaking, and she was willing to back up her words with bullets. Brant and his men had no desire to question the authority of that unwavering gun and the flashing black eyes. They mounted and rode away.

Putting away her gun, the wild girl vanished again, perhaps forever, unless another time might come when she must return to protect her own. Now she was Martha Beckman, humbly holding out a cherry red fiddle to a tall, lean Texan with bruised knuckles and torn clothes and an amazed expression on his face.

"Pops repaired it, Bill," she said. "I was bringing it to you."

He took it in his hands and turned it over and over, but he wasn't looking at the gleaming instrument. He was staring up at the black-haired girl.

"And I," he said, his voice not quite steady, "was coming to you, Martha. I couldn't stay away another day."

Not wanting him to see the sudden tears in her eyes, she swung her horse around and galloped away. She didn't glance back. She had returned the fiddle. The rest was up to Bill.

The Texan found her sitting on the big boulder overlooking Pinpoint Lake, waiting for him at the place where they had first met. Neither spoke. He took her in his arms and held her close.

"Play for me, Bill," she said at last.

He got the cherry red fiddle and began to play, and the whole world about them was lost in the sweetness of his music. Below them, the color of the lake turned from blue to a rose-tinted purple as the shadows lengthened and the sun touched the white mountain tops.

AROUND THE BRANDING FIRE

(Continued from page 7)

from mesquite beans and whatever meat the desert afforded.

That particular variety o' mesquite has a small bean pod, somewhat like our "English" pea, only flatter. The Indians take the beans and pound 'em into meal in a mortar and then make bread from the meal. I've tasted bread made o' mesquite meal, and it wasn't bad a'tall. It has a rather sweet, acidulated taste. And it'll keep edible for a longer period o' time than any bread I know.

The Indians, especially the Mojavas along the hot, sandy valley o' the Colorado, eat the "tornillo" or "screw" mesquite that grows so luxuriantly there.

And mesquite has got another use that makes it valuable on the desert. Wood is scarce as water in that barren soil, and there's mighty little fire wood can be had from the limbs o' the mesquite bush. But the roots of the plant grow big and solid, and make mighty clean-burnin' fire wood for stove or hearth. They have to dig for it, and it's hard grubbin', but lots o' Mexicans earn a livin' sellin' mesquite roots to the towns and villages.

Slow and Patient

One o' these days you'll travel West in person, Myrle, and when you do you're sure to see the small donkeys, called "burros." If you see one with a load o' wood piled high on his back, you can be sure it's mesquite root, and will make somebody a fire. You'll see a dark-skinned Mexican in a picturesque hat what has a "peaked" crown trudgin' along beside the little animal. Man and beast walk slow and patient, like they had all day to get wherever they're goin'. "Tomorrow" to the Mexican is just as good as "to-day." Maybe he's got somethin' there.

'Nother plumb interestin' plant o' the desert, and one what's got quite a history, is "mescal." It's a cactus, and is also called maguey. But the word mescal has two meanin's, and the term can be a little confusin'. Both the plant and the beverage made from it are called "mescal."

If it's the alcoholic beverage you're samplin', why take it a mite easy—it's got the lightnin' kick of a mule. The juice is called pulque at first, and that's a mild sort o' beverage, but it's fermented into the drink called mescal.

A Plant of Many Uses

Mescal, or maguey, was a mighty useful plant to the Indians in a number o' ways. They made their ropes from its tough fiber. When they had sewin' to do, they went to the mescal plant for needle and thread. They learned to tear out one o' the hard, tough thorns in such a way as to leave a long fiber hangin' to it—needle and thread!

The braves used the sapling mescal stem what shoots up from the main plant for their lances in the days when they made war on each other and the white man. Made a good tough weapon, too. And, believe it or not, they made a sort o' fiddle from the mescal stalk. They cut it into sections o' proper length and strung it with sinews. Pretty crude musical instrument, I reckon, but it was better'n nothin'.

The plant was used in many other ways. The old desert bein' bare o' most usable materials, the early Injuns learned to utilize everything to its fullest.

There's many varieties o' cactus to be seen as you travel through the western country. To mention just one, the giant sujuara is sure a interestin' plant. It grows powerful big in the state o' Arizona. In places it grows all over the landscape, and it looks like a grove o' giants with several thick, grotesque arms flung out crazily. A pretty ghostly sight by moonlight. You'll be able to see lots o' sujuara from the highway, 'specially around Tucson, Arizona.

Mighty glad to give you the information you asked, Myrle Homer—and all the rest of you-folks, keep those questions about the West coming in!

LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

ONE time there was a waddy working in the same outfit with me that we all called "Windy" Carter. Never knew a man who could talk so much and say so little in my life. There were some who claimed that when Windy got near a babbling brook

the water just stopped running in disgust. Knew it couldn't even keep up with Windy.

"Nice morning for so late in the summer, course it might rain or get too hot but I don't reckon there's any kick about the weather as it is right now," Windy stated after the bunch had saddled up and were ready to ride out one morning. "Got to be careful of the wind, too. If it gets to blowing hard there's likely to be trouble."

I was lucky that day. I wasn't working with Windy. He would just keep on talking like that all day long, and as the feller says, far into the night. But it wasn't until he started getting a letter just about every time there was any mail for the ranch that he got going like a house on fire.

"Here's another letter from my uncle," Windy would say. "He's still hunting gold. Got mixed up with a grizzly, much to the bear's sorrow."

"What happened?" I asked, not that I really wanted to know.

"Well, Uncle Pete grabs the bear by the tail, whirls it around his head three times and throws it clear into the next county," Windy said. "And just then Pete turns around and sees a big pack of timber wolves coming after him—"

"Tell me the rest of it later," I said. "I've got to see a horse about a saddle."

I went away from there fast. When I happened to come back that way half an hour later Windy was gone, but I found that he had dropped one of the letters from his uncle. I knew it sure wasn't right to read other folks mail, but I just had to see if Uncle Pete really was as big a liar as Windy made out.

So I started reading the letter. All it said was:

Things sure are dull here. Haven't moved off the front porch in weeks. Just been sitting here watching a couple of robins building a nest. Hope you are in good health. Your uncle, Pete.

I put the letter back in the envelope and left it where Windy would find it when he came looking for it. He got it all right. Next time he saw me he started right in.

"There was more to my uncle's letter," he said. "I didn't tell you the part about the Indians."

"You didn't even tell me about the robins' nest," I said.

Windy blinked, and lost interest in telling any more about the letter right then. For maybe two full hours he didn't even talk, and the silence was sure startling.

Now if Windy had had some of the nice letters we have been receiving from members of THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB I figure he would have been a heap more entertaining. If there are some of you who haven't yet joined THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB, then get busy and do it right away. There are no dues or fees and it's a mighty fine club for those who like the West.

Reckon you all realize there just isn't room to print all the letters in one issue of the magazine and still have space for the stories, departments and all. But if you don't see your letter in the department this time, chances are that you are in the list of BRANDING FIRE CLUB MEMBERS or that your name will appear in some future issue.

About time we got looking over the letters we've been receiving, so let's get started. Just to be sure to get in as many letters as possible we may cut your letter down a little —but it's just to save space. And remember we are thanking all of you for writing and joining THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB. Now let's look at the mail:

For a long time I was very lonely because my husband, who is a disabled ex-service man, was an in-patient in a military hospital in England. He has a bullet in his right lung, which several operations have failed to remove, and is now back home with me incurable, but under medical advice we had to leave England for a warmer climate.

We have recently arrived in South Africa, and having no friends or relatives here, you can well imagine how very lonesome and alone I am feeling, besides being terribly homesick. As my husband does not go out of doors very much, therefore I have to stay indoors to keep him company, and so would love to have some pen pals. My husband is British, but I was born in Paris, France. My age is 44 years. My interests are receiving and writing letters, reading, and the movies. Correspondents from both sexes are welcome, from the ages of 30 to 65 years. I would love to hear from any country in the world and I promise to answer every letter I receive, and I am looking forward to being well loaded up with mail from all you kind people.

—Mrs. Renee Natscha Riche.
15 Dunedin Court-Alexandra St., Smith Street, Durban, South Africa.

I have been reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES for a long time and have enjoyed every story. Though my home is, or was in Alabama, I like all I've seen of the West, and I've seen quite a large part of it. As any Texan will tell you, when you've seen Texas you have seen the West and most of the U. S. A. I agree because I like Texas very much.

I have been ashore here for 29 months. The

longest I've been in any one place since I enlisted in the Navy over six years ago. I'm 23, 5 feet 6 inches tall, weigh 150 lbs and have dark brown hair and brown eyes. I like all outdoor sports, especially swimming, hiking and horse-back riding. I promise to answer all letters and I'll be glad to exchange snapshots with the first few who write.

—Johnny R. Sanders, AM 3. USN
Master Shops, NAAS Cabaniss Field, Corpus Christi, Texas.

I'm just crazy about THRILLING RANCH STORIES. I have black wavy hair, am 5 feet 7 inches tall and weight 140 lbs. My hobbies are writing poetry, songs and short stories. I promise to send out a poem for each letter I get. So come on, everyone, and fill my mail box up to the top.

—Anthony J. Frezza.
5 Elk Street, Providence, R. I.

I sure want to thank you for printing my plea for pen pals. I have received piles of letters, and it almost seems impossible to answer all of them. So I want to thank the guys and gals for writing so many nice letters. They sure have been a lot of company to me. I don't get near so lonely now. Thanks again, amigos.

—June Hill.
Rt 2, Box 53 A, Rockhold, Kentucky.

I live on a farm in the Virginia hills and love to receive letters as it is very lonesome here. I am 42 years old and 5 feet 7 inches tall. I have enjoying reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES for several years. My hobbies are reading and collecting miniature animals. Would like to hear from anyone from 38 to 70.

—Nell E. Webb.
Hillsville, Va.

I have been reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES for some time now and enjoy the magazine very much. My hobby is animal training. I am also a lover of all animals. My favorite sport is horseback riding. I own my own horse and am taking care of some other horses now. I love to be around them. I am 19 years old, 6 feet 5 inches tall, have brown hair and gray eyes. I will trade snapshots with anyone who wants to trade with me and answer all letters if possible.

—William D. Monk.
Rt 1, Box 181, Wylie, Texas.

I am one of the many thousands who live out West where the snow gets deep and the temperature drops to 20 below zero. I have lotsa time on my hands and would love to hear from pen pals all ages, say from 18 to 65 years young. My hobbies are many, view cards, buttons, Western songs, Western records, stamps, books and snapshots of pen-pals. I'm not what you'd call pretty, and so far I haven't stopped any 8 day clocks.

I'm neither young or old, not old enough for the old age pension—yet. Somewhere between 30 and 36. Will send snapshots to all who send theirs. Is that a deal?

I have been a reader of THRILLING RANCH STORIES since 1940. If you don't know what ranch life is like, let me tell ya. Hope to see my mail box filled. I promise to answer all letters. I'm just a prairie pal from old Montana.

—Mitsy Montana.
Erickson Ranch, Corvallie, Montana.

I have been reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES for some time and thought I would write and say how much I have enjoyed it. There is one thing I wish you would do for me, put my name in THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB department. Someone might have some friends in Service at this field. I would like to make friends with them. I am 19 years old, and have blue eyes, blond hair and am 5 feet 11½ inches tall, weigh 154 lbs. I like all outdoor sports and promise to answer all letters. A friend to all who read THRILLING RANCH STORIES.

—PFC Conrad W. Green.
Hq-Sq-AFTRC, Box 286, Scott A. F. B., Belleville, Ill.

I enjoy reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES so much! I am 22 years old, 5 feet 6 inches tall, have brown curly hair and blue eyes. My hobby is playing the guitar, singing and yodeling. I would especially enjoy hearing from young folks who play the guitar or some string instrument. I promise to answer all letters and exchange snapshots.

—Delores Anderson.
Box 85, Ah Gwah Ching, Minn.

I have been reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES for some time and it gets better and better all the time. It is my favorite magazine. I am 18 years old, have blond hair, hazel eyes, and am 5 feet 5 inches tall. My hobbies are writing letters and reading. My favorite sports are hiking and swimming. I would like to hear from people around my own age from all over the world. I will answer all letters and will be glad to exchange photos with the first who write.

—Valeria Shimkus.
11921 Lowe Avenue, Chicago, 28, Illinois.

I am 23 years old, have dark hair and hazel eyes, love music, bowling and tennis. Will gladly answer all letters and exchange pictures of the city and also snapshots.

—Frances L. Dewey.
3821 St. George Street, Vancouver, B. C., Canada.

I read THRILLING RANCH STORIES and think they are the best stories you can read. I particularly enjoyed THE WAY OF THE PROUD. Keep them coming like that one. I am 19 years old, 5 feet 11 inches tall, weigh 170 lbs., have brown hair, gray eyes. My hobbies are collecting movie star pictures, match covers and the best of all, reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES.

THE BRANDING FIRE SONG BOOK is swell —there are some fine songs in it. I'm writing every song down so I won't lose them. GOODBYE TO THE BUNKHOUSE was a fine song.

I save the THRILLING RANCH STORIES after I read them. I have around a hundred. I wouldn't take a hundred dollars for them, because I read them over every time I can. I have already read them over two or three times. I

will exchange snapshots with anyone who writes.

—*Gene White.*

Rt. 1, Box 212, Clover, S. C.

I am a steady reader of THRILLING RANCH STORIES—have been for a mighty long time, but never have asked to have my name and address listed with the rest of your writing range dogies. So will you please give a good old white American Indian a chance to receive a few letters, too? I faithfully promise everyone who writes to me that they will get at least one letter in answer to theirs if not more, and age or sex does not matter, but the opposite sex is my greatest delight, for I believe all girls and women are just wonderful. I have golden blond hair, with a pair of nice blue eyes to match.

My hobbies are collecting match book covers, also all kinds of rare stones and coins. I also make all kinds of bricabrac out of all kinds of wood. I am also an Ex Forest Ranger, deputy sheriff and special agent for some railroads once upon a time. I promise everyone an interesting chat if they will write to me.

—*Chief Silver Star White Eagle.*

33½ Southwest Temple Street, Salt Lake City, Utah.

I have been a reader of THRILLING RANCH STORIES for a good many years and still enjoy it as much as ever. AROUND THE BRANDING FIRE and THE BRANDING FIRE SONG BOOK are two of my favorite features. I would like to hear from anyone who likes to write letters, especially those who collect hillbilly and Western songs and are willing to exchange songs.

I am 19 years old, with blue eyes and light brown hair. I have lived on a farm all my life until about two months ago when we moved into town, and it gets kind of lonesome with nothing much to do, so come on everybody and drop me a line. I have plenty of time to answer all letters received.

—*Ervy Jo Hill.*

General Delivery, Hereford, Texas.

I have been reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES for some time and really think it's tops. I am a young widow and get very lonesome at times and would enjoy hearing from folks around my own age. I am 25 years old, 5 feet 4 inches tall, weigh 120 lbs and have blond hair, dark blue eyes and will answer all letters.

—*Mildred Clary.*

General Delivery, Riverbank, California.

Looks like that's about all the letters we'll quote from for this time, but we shore are thanking everybody for writing and we'll be printing more of your fine letters in the next issue. And now here is a list of some folks who are new members of THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB:

Murlene Smith, Oak Ridge R. S., Pell City, Ala.
Elsie Wright, Oak Ridge R. S., Pell City, Ala.
Wilfred Czappa, General Delivery, Nekoona, Wis.
Connie De Marco, 439 West 28th Street, New York, N.Y.
Hazel Rea Wise, Route 3, Samson, Ala.
Andrew Gibson, Call, Texas.
Mrs. Doris Binckley, R. R. 3, Barnesville, Minn.
Shirley Birk, Hibert, Wis.
Mrs. Minnie Glasby, Route 2, Kinde, Mich.
Miriam R. Retzlaff, 773 West 1 South, Salt Lake City, Utah.
Mrs. Lavon F. Flemmer, Pettibone, North Dakota.
Nick Fosco, 3100 W. Polk Street, Chicago, 12, Ill.
Cora E. Ringo, 623 Willard Street, Washington, Ohio.
Neal Panttila, Burton, Ohio.
Eileen Cline, 1863 Howard Street, Indianapolis, Indiana.
Betty Young, General Delivery, Redding, California.
Henry Morlitt, 10 Steele Avenue, Groversville, N.Y.
Eileen Jaacks, 140 E. Broadway, Denison, Iowa.
Martha Vaughn, Box 238, Rt. 4, Douglasville, Ga.
Chester Glenn Duncan, Box 242, Coldwater, Kansas.
Fred Rose, Box 6541, Cleveland, 1, Ohio.
Miss Willie Stout, Rt. 1, Box 12, Graford, Texas.
Charmyn Brock, Lake City, Iowa.
Harry L. Jones, 511 W Highland, Muncie, Indiana.
Roy H. Schwabe, Chelsea, Wisconsin.
Starr Pillois, 4807 Bankhead Ave, Norfolk, 13, Va.
Mrs. Meta Corley, Star Route, Vidalia, La.
Sandra Sue Mann, R. R. 1, Verona, Mo.
Barbara Mann, Route 1, Verona, Mo.
Nadean McNiel, R. R. 1, Verona, Mo.
Maggie Frances Huffman, Route 2, Starkville, Miss.
Evelyn Heukerath, Stettler, Alberta, Canada.
Mary June Duff, Cedar Grove, West Virginia.
Delmar Harless, 4671 Darnell Road, Hunting, Rt 2, West Virginia.
Mrs. June M. Gastonguay, Box 123, Collison, Ill.
James Choate, Owensville, Indiana.
Cpl. James Wiecks, 17242160, 3605 Motor Vehic Sq., Ellington A. F. Base, Houston, Texas.
Ervin White, Route 2, Augusta, Ark.
Marion Ronning, 307 West 4th St., Duluth, Minn.
Mrs. June Johnston, 453 Caplen Park, Spokane, 14, Washington.
Mrs. Carmen Delores Welch, R. R. 1, Ramsey, Illinois.
Joyce Willingham, 614 West Hayes, Elreno, Okla.
Hallie J. Murray, 2210 So. Seventh, St. Louis, Mo.
Addeen Higgins, Box 65, Kenton, Oklahoma.
Barbara Smithson, Box 74, Kenton, Oklahoma.
Herbert H. Morton, 940½ Bay View Avenue, Wilmington, Calif.
Cpl. Lee McKinney, 3605th Motor Vehic Sqd., Ellington A. F. Base, Houston, Texas.
Sherman Woodruff, 5107 Stuart St., Denver, 12, Colorado.

Yes, sir, makes us mighty proud to hear from that grand new bunch of BRANDING FIRE CLUB members, and of course we are always plumb delighted when more folks join the club—so how about you doing just that? Everybody please address all your letters and postcards to The Editor, THRILLING RANCH STORIES, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. Thank you!

OUR NEXT ISSUE

THERE I was wandering around muttering to myself—and any old cowhand will tell you that a waddy's best friend is his mutter. When a feller leads a lonely life out on the range sometimes he sure gets talking to himself or to his horse.

"Now if I could just think of the right words," I kept mumbling over and over again.

"Right words for what, Tex?" asked a voice behind me.

I looked around and there was the boss standing watching me.

"The right words to tell the folks about the

grand bunch of stories we have all ready for the next issue of THRILLING RANCH STORIES," I said.

"I can think of the right words to get you started," said the boss. "And they are—Do it now!"

Which was sure good advice so that's what I'm going to do right here and now.

First comes THE GIRL FROM THE EAST, an intensely dramatic novelet by Roe Richmond. Kay Starrett was mighty happy as she rode in the stagecoach that was headed for Cherokee Valley. And why not, since she was traveling West to marry Bob Chapple, the young rancher that she loved. There was only one other passenger in the coach, a strong-faced young man dressed in range clothes. Kay learned that his name was "Tray" Traynor and that he was Bob Chapple's best friend. Traynor expected to work for Bob's Hatchet outfit.

When they reached the town of Chickasaw and got out of the stage Kay and Traynor received a shock. There was no sign of Bob and finally a big, handsome man named Lee Brandyce broke the news to the girl that Bob

[*Turn page*]

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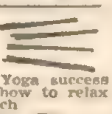

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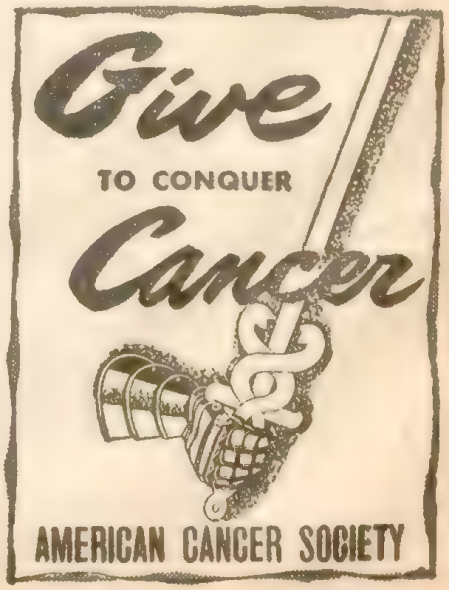
Chapple was dead—that he had been killed when his horse went down with him in front of a stampeding herd of cattle. Brandyce also announced that he was Bob's partner, since he had bought a half interest in the Hatchet.

Traynor was suspicious of Brandyce and some of the other men in the town. There had been a couple of attempts to drygulch Traynor and he was sure that someone was out to get him. He felt that Brandyce was back of it, but Kay refused to believe it. Lee Brandyce had proved himself a perfect gentleman as far as she was concerned. Gradually she grew to trust him more than she did Traynor.

This action packed yarn rises to a smashing climax as Kay learns that she must make up her mind which man means the most to her—and there is six-gun war in the making. THE GIRL FROM THE EAST packs plenty of tense drama and romance all the way through!

Next comes LOVE AND THE CACTUS KID, a fascinating novelet by Louis L'Amour. Nesselrode Clay, better known as the Cactus Kid, was in love with Jenny Simms, who was a pretty—and also a very determined—young lady. All she wanted the Cactus Kid to do was to get her some flowers. It seemed a simple request, and there was just one hitch to it. The surrounding country had suffered a four months' dry spell and there just weren't any flowers to be found anywhere around.

Besides, the Cactus Kid didn't want to go hunting flowers. He felt that he should be



out with the posse chasing the Herring boys. There were three of them, and all were gun-slick and tough. They had stopped the U. P. Train on a grade about fifteen miles from town, killed the express messenger and the fireman. Then they had looted the safe of forty thousand dollars in gold and bills. There was a reward on them, a thousand apiece for Benny and Joe, and four thousand for Red.

The Cactus Kid felt that with that money he could buy some cows and stock that little ranch he was planning on buying. He could set up a home for a girl like Jenny to be proud of, and with his know-how about cows they could soon be well off. But no, instead of hunting for the Herrings, she wanted him to go hunt flowers.

Since the Cactus Kid had a firm will of his own as far as Jenny was concerned—well, he went hunting flowers in a wild section of the rangeland. He found flowers and also the Herring brothers—only the three outlaws discovered him first. What the Cactus Kid did about it makes LOVE AND THE CACTUS KID a yarn that's crowded with thrills and excitement!

In addition to these big headliners, our next issue will also bring you a special group of selected novelets chosen for their fast-action thrills and romantic glamour.

First of the selected novelets will be BUNKHOUSE BANDIT, by Eugene A. Clancy. This is an exciting range classic in which Jackie Dayton sides an "outlaw" in a powdersmoke campaign to stamp out a rattlers' nest of Border badmen. Packed with action and filled with the spirit of Western

[*Turn page*]

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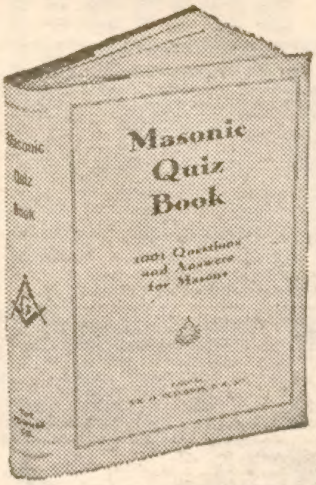

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